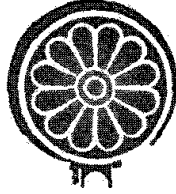


*Persian Heritage Series No. 18*

Ehsan Yar-Shater, Editor



# folk tales of ancient persia

*Retold by*  
**FOROUGH HEKMAT**

*with the collaboration of*  
**YANN LOVELOCK**

*Illustrated by*  
**Muhammad Bahrami**

**CARAVAN BOOKS**  
Delmar, New York  
1974

## FOR MY DAUGHTER NASRIN

Folk Tales of Ancient Persia

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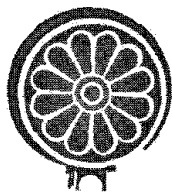
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# preface

*"Children have been told many a tale,  
Amidst their tales, words of Wisdom."*

— Rumi, 12th-century Persian  
poet and mystic philosopher.

THE STORIES related in this book are a part of my country's vast oral tradition of folk-tales. I first heard these stories as a child in Shiraz, a lovely, shining city in the south of Iran, a city said to be as old as civilization. It has been called "the delightful city of nightingales and roses," for everywhere in it may be found delightful and informal green gardens where roses abound and in which nightingales love to sing.

The Persian name for the nightingale is *Hezar Dastan* ["bird of a thousand melodies"] since these birds repeat their notes and melodies through night and day with a sound so shrill that it can be heard for some distance. On many summer nights during my childhood I could not get to sleep until dawn, for a few of them had nested in the gardens surrounding our house and their singing was constant.

The rose of Shiraz is a distinctive variety. Although it is small, its fragrance is both strong and sweet. Since ancient times it has been a source of the Persian rose perfume, and of rose water, products which Iran still exports to many countries of the world.

During my childhood there were no schools such as those in the Western world, but for many centuries the Persians have had two principal systems of education. One is open to people of all classes; it was greatly improved after Persia's conversion to Islam in the seventh century A.D. One of the principles of this

religion was that education should be brought to everyone, from the highest to the lowest. There were set up, therefore, buildings known as *Maktab-khaneh* ["House of Writing"]. All children from five years of age, girls as well as boys, could go there to learn reading and writing, poetry, history, and moral behavior; and also Arabic, so that they would be able to understand the Qur'an in the original language. After reaching the age of eight years, however, girls were no longer allowed to attend these schools.

Each House of Writing would have no more than about 30 students at any one time; it was presided over by a single teacher. He was never regularly paid, but parents would usually offer him gifts of food or money if they could afford it. This system of education was to be found from the smallest village to the largest city. From it emerged many of Persia's most learned men, such as the poet and philosopher best known to the West, 'Umar Khayyam, and many others like Saadi, Hafiz, Firdausi, Razi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), al-Biruni, Nezamol Molk, and Rashid al-Din. In the 11th century it was said that there were 800 women who could teach and interpret the Qur'an in Shiraz alone, all the products of this widespread system.

Aside from the House of Writing there is an even older system, dating back to antiquity, which was largely reserved for the well-to-do classes. Those families that could afford it had private tutors to educate their children; typically, there would be tutors for literature, history, geography, arithmetic, ethics, and Arabic.

Children could also learn much from the servants and nurses who lived with every big family. These men and women were the first to introduce the young to the folklore and customs of the various parts of Iran, a country seven times the size of Great Britain. In the evening, when servants and children had no more to do, they would gather together, and the servants would tell about life in the part of Iran they came from as children, repeating the tales they had learned in their own villages or towns. For us as children this was a happy time; in those days there were no other forms of entertainment; there was no cinema, television, radio, children's library, not even a playground.



In addition, there were professional story-tellers for hire in every city. From time to time one of them would be invited to the house by the head of the family. Here he would be entertained at a special dinner with the choicest delicacies and fruits. Then, sitting down with the parents, children, relatives — and often guests invited for the occasion — he would tell the most thrilling tales of love and heroism from ancient Persia.

The history of these storytellers also goes back to ancient times. In the courts of the Persian shahs there were to be found three important and highly respected ranks whose job it was to write the past history of the kingdom, to chronicle daily events, and to relate them whenever it was so desired. Those who dealt with daily events, the chroniclers, wrote down everything of interest that happened from day to day in the land. Other learned men would eventually select from these the most important happenings in writing condensed histories of past reigns. Finally, those who related events were the story-tellers. These men chose the most interesting political or social deeds of heroism and love stories, and fashioned them into stories. As a story was transmitted through the ages, successive generations of story-tellers would add or subtract details, according to their skills, and eventually it came to form a part of the national folklore tradition. Of course, many stories took forms very different from the way they had started, so that a version told in one part of the country differed greatly from one told elsewhere.

In the East the spoken or written word has always been the most important means of expressing thought and feeling. Painting and sculpture have always been accorded less importance, and were in fact frowned upon by orthodox religious leaders for many years. But there are thousands of stories, many of which have never been written down but have been passed along by word of mouth. Those that have been told have often come down in the form of poems which have served as an inspiration to several Western writers. The story of *Suhrah and Rustam*<sup>1</sup> is

1. See Firdausi, *Suhrah and Rustam: A Poem from the Shah Namah of Firdausi*, trans. James Atkinson (Calcutta, 1814; Reprint. Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars' Fascimiles & Reprints, 1972). See also Matthew Arnold's poem «Sohrah & Rustum.»

only one of these, taken originally from Firdausi's long epic, the *Shah Namah*, or Book of Kings.

Earlier in this century before Iran was modernized, story-tellers were still regarded as among the most knowledgeable persons in the community and related their tales in the old classical style. They were full of wit, humor, anecdotes, asides, and stories within stories; they mocked and satirized; they were a mine of metaphors and beautiful comparisons; they combined elegant language with many enchanting poems. There is a wealth of such material in Persian literature.

I shall always remember those nights when I and my brothers and sisters listened to such stories, often failing to stay awake to hear the endings, for they went on and on into the late evening hours. On one occasion, we children complained to our father that the stories were so long that they never seemed to end. "How can you say that?" he exclaimed; "why, I've heard one story-teller who took forty nights in describing how only one shoe was put on the foot of a bride."

Next to such treats as this I shall remember the happy summer nights when Persian carpets were spread at the edge of a pool among the roses and jasmine and beneath the moon. There we would sit with our nurses and some of the head servants as they started to tell the stories from their different regions, each with a version of his own. And each newcomer would bring different stories or different versions.

Time passed and I eventually married and had a daughter of my own. She too had the opportunity to learn country wisdom from nurses and servants. But there was now a difference, for she could go to a modern school and there were playgrounds, libraries, cinemas, radio, and eventually television. When the servants had told her about the folklore of the country she would tell them in return of what she had learned from all these modern media. And which stories do you think were the more thrilling, more enchanting, more imaginative?

When I began to notice this difference between the new and the old I decided it was time to record some of the stories that had been my favorites, before they were lost altogether. They

are but a few of the many which have still to be recorded in books, but they are a beginning.

Of the ten stories included in this collection, two are from antiquity: "The Lion & The Donkey" and "The Cat-King and the Mice." The latter story was written seven hundred years ago in a poem in the simple style of children's language; it consists of short couplets, full of satire, whose main purpose was to criticize the contemporary political situation. The tale of the donkey is selected from a group of animal fables which were collected some two thousand years ago in a book known as *Bid Paay*, or *Kalileh va Demneh*.<sup>2</sup> Some of these were to turn up later in collections of similar tales in the West, based on Aesop's fables.

Of course, versions of the Persian folk-tales also were told in other countries. They are also to be found in neighboring countries, or in those with which Persia has had contact in the past, such as Greece. And many were spread at a time when all Islamic countries had a common culture stretching from northern India to the Near East, and from there over all northern Africa and into Spain. Similarly, folk tales of other nations were brought into Persia.

If a story is good enough it will spread from country to country, passed on by those who love to tell stories to those who love hearing them and passing them on in their turn. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the reader of these stories recognized echoes of other stories he has known. To give only one example, "Yasmin and the Serpent Prince" from the present collection is to be found in a very different form in an Ar-

2. This was the old **Pahlavi** version of the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*. See Franklin Edgerton's translation in *The Panchatantra Reconstructed* (New Haven, 1924) and the slightly revised version entitled *The Panchatantra* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965; Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1973). The story of "The Lion and the Donkey" does not appear as such in the Indian version but the enclosed parable of the fox and the drum does. Again, "The Greatest" appears as the story of "The Mouse-maiden" in the *Panchatantra*.

menian tale.<sup>3</sup> There is also a version even more remote collected by Grimm<sup>4</sup> (*Das svigerde, sprigende Löwoeneckercher*), and the theme of the trials of an imprudent wife is found in the Greek legend of Cupid and Psyche.

And now a word of explanation about the way all Persian folk-tales begin, with the words *Yeki bood, yeki nabood, joz Khoda kasi nabood*. This means

There was one,  
there was no one,  
except God, there was no one else.

It is infused with the philosophical thought that even when the world was a void, and there was nothing, there still existed a Creative Force or Power to which may be attributed, perhaps, the miracles which take place in the tales that follow. It certainly goes much further than the "Once upon a time" with which many English folk-tales begin.

The principal subjects with which these stories deal are: the importance of the individual and his search for a purpose in life; the absurdity of prejudice against the female, the poor, and the humble — and even animals; the nonsense of the fatalistic belief in an absolute Destiny that overrules the will of the individual and the course of his life; and the cruelty and purposelessness of war. Under the most innocent of children's tales lies a moral purpose, as Rumi, the twelfth-century Persian poet and mystical philosopher points out in such lines as,

Children have been told many a tale;  
Amidst their stories — words of wisdom.

And also in these by the same author:

The observant notices  
Under the face of each tale  
A magnificent feature of deep sense.

3. See "Habermayn, the Serpent Prince," in *Apples of Immortality*, trans. Leon Surmelian, Unesco Collection of Representative Works, Asian Series (London: Allen & Unwin; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968). ~

4. The story of Tom Thumb, Grimm's *Daumesdick*, on the other hand, is extremely close to the story of "Little Pea" up to the incident of the wolf's swallowing the cow's stomach.

Armenians generally conclude their stories with words which point to the same lesson: "Three apples fell from heaven: one for the teller of this tale; one for the listener; and one for him who heeds the teller's words."

As to the actual method of telling the stories, it will be seen that many features of the classical style of recounting, already mentioned, are employed here, although naturally in a restricted way, since these stories are meant for children. Forty nights cannot be spent in describing how one slipper is fitted to a bride's foot! But there is one feature above all others in which the style delights, as any reader of *The Thousand and One Nights* well knows, and that is the telling of stories within stories, as sometimes happens here. Ideally all these stories should be combined into one master story which occasions the telling of all the others, like a succession of little Chinese boxes all fitted into each other. But that is a task I shall leave to your imagination.

*Forough Hekmat*

*Rome, 1970*

# Yasmin and the serpent prince

*Yeki bood, Yeki nabood, Joz Khcda kasi nabood.* ... In ancient times there was once a merchant of a Persian city whose name was Hajji Muhammad. One autumn afternoon he resolved to take a journey of many months seeing to his affairs throughout the land. And so he called to him his five daughters, dear to him more than wealth. And of the five he loved Yasmin, his youngest, most.

The like of this maiden for beauty has never been seen since in all the world. As dainty as a flower, gay as a butterfly, she was, and her movements more sinuous than those of a fish through water. Her long silken curls were black as the midnight, her cheeks prettier than the pomegranate's flower. Hajji was justly proud of this rosebud and carefully protected her from all wicked eyes.

With his daughters about him, Hajji asked each what gifts he should bring on his return.

"I should like a red satin dress and shoes trimmed with gold," said the eldest.

"I would prefer a blue silk gown embroidered with pearls," said the second.

"And I," cried the third, "a pair of golden slippers trimmed with emeralds."

"Nothing would please me more than a silver-net veil, fringed with rubies," said the fourth.

"And what shall I bring for you, my rose?" asked Hajji, turning to the youngest.

"Dear Baba (Daddy), could you please find me a clustered bunch of grape-like pearls and a starred, two-pointed diamond?"

Hajji promised to bring all that they desired and set out on his long journey. When he had completed his business successfully he recalled his promises and went searching through the bazaars (markets). Gay dresses of red and blue he could easily find, and shoes to match. He bought the golden slippers trimmed with emeralds, and the silver-net veil fringed with rubies. But, alas, no one had ever heard of a clustered bunch of grape-like pearls, nor of a starred, two-pointed diamond. And this troubled Hajji, for whom the happiness of Yasmin was a matter of great importance. But search as long as he might, he could not come across the gifts for which she had asked, and finally at evening he had to set out home without them.

The night was dark and a wild wind started up, blowing a storm before. Lightning flashed and thunder roared; the rain came down in torrents. It soaked Hajji, streaming into the heels of his shoes and running out at the points. He was so buffeted about by the weather that he looked around for shelter but could find none until, by the first faint streaks of dawn, he made out a great castle standing in the middle of a plain. But when he rode up to the gate and knocked upon it nobody came to open it. He pounded harder and suddenly the gate opened all by itself. Riding into the courtyard he got off his horse, and was surprised to find there was no storm there. It was a strange place, and he noticed that in the green and peaceful garden the trees were shining; but it was not rain that made them shine. They were made of silver and gold.

Large flowers gleamed in the strange light of the place, swaying the breeze. And these enchanting and beautiful blooms, he saw, were made up of precious gems. Streams of milk and honey flowed from the base of the trees, and from each tree came a different melody, all harmonizing with one another. Hajji stood wide-eyed, with wonder, overcome by such a wealth of dazzling beauty, gazing and listening with delight. He forgot

about the storm and his former misery, content to follow a path between these marvellous trees.

Suddenly he saw before him a vine on which hung a cluster of pearls the shape of grapes. And just beyond that a shrub was flowering with diamonds like two-pointed stars. These were the very gifts that Yasmin had asked him to bring; eagerly he reached for the largest jewels, but before he could pick them his very blood was frozen by the most frightful roaring. He turned around and found himself looking into the cold and glittering eyes of a serpent. It was a huge monster, bright green in color, curled around an ivory throne at the end of the grape-arbor and reared up above it with an air of great dignity.

"Man, what are you looking for in my garden? Pearls and diamonds?" the serpent boomed to him.

"Salaam, peace be with you, most honorable serpent," Hajji quavered, thinking that surely the time had come when he was to die. "I was on my way home but got lost in the storm, and while looking for shelter found myself in your rare and beautiful garden."

"And what were you about to steal? — Purely by accident, of course!" exclaimed the monstrous snake in icy fury.

"Sir, my most precious daughter asked me when I set out to bring back for her a clustered bunch of grape-like pearls and a starred, two-pointed diamond. But search how I could, I was never able to come by them until I found them here. Would it please you to be so gracious as to allow me to buy some of them?"

Casually the serpent enquired what he had to give him in exchange. The merchant was so overjoyed at the thought of finding at last the gifts Yasmin wanted that he forgot his fear and blurted out "I'll give you whatever you ask."

"In that case you may have them. But you must give me your youngest daughter as my wife."

The merchant shrunk back in horror. "What! My daughter as your wife? That is too much. How could she live happily with a serpent? Ask anything but that."

"Your daughter would be perfectly happy; just leave that to me. You shall have wealth such as you have never dreamed of if



only you will give her to me. Give me your promise and everything will turn out well."

"Only God knows what is to happen in the future," the merchant thought to himself. "How can I be sure that within an hour the serpent's head might not be crushed by a stone? And after all, it is a long journey home. How could he find his way to my house? He's only a serpent, after all." This is what he thought, and he told the serpent that everything should be as he wished whenever he came to his house.

"Bind yourself by a written promise," the serpent commanded, and when it had all been committed to paper the merchant was allowed to take away as many jewels as he could carry. The sun came out and the merchant eagerly plunged into the sparkling, flashing garden, loading himself with treasures, not forgetting the special gifts for Yasmin. The serpent had vanished from sight by the time he leaped onto his horse and rode out on his way.

Hajji came home after many more days, weary with travelling, and so great was his delight at being safe with his family once again, so great was the excitement of his daughters on receiving their gifts, that he quite forgot the promise he had made. But he had not been home a day when there came a loud knocking very early in the morning. Three times it was repeated, until at last the servants came to inform their master that someone was at the gate. Puzzled at who should wish to wake him so early the merchant went to to see this visitor, and started back in fear, his face white and his whole body trembling, to find the serpent coiled outside, his neck erect, his eyes glittering with cold command.

"Salaam, noble merchant," said the serpent with officious rhetoric. "I have come to claim your daughter, as we arranged." At this the merchant broke out into a cold sweat and all his old uneasiness came back on being reminded of his promise. How was he to break the news to his favorite daughter, to whom he had not even mentioned his meeting with the serpent, far less that it wished to have her for a wife? He could only stammer, "How did you find your way here?" in a dry-throated voice that echoed in the frosty air.

"Never you mind, that is my affair. Have you talked this matter over with your daughter, and is she prepared to see me? "

Hajji hesitated in embarrassment, wiping the sweat from his brow. "I have your written promise," the serpent reminded him, "so will you be so good as to go to her now and tell her that I have come to claim her."

There was no help for it, so he went back slowly into the house, feeling more and more miserable as he thought about it, and told the story to Yasmin in great distress. His daughter listened in silence, turning as pale as death at the thought of having to marry a monster. But she was a sensible girl and said finally:

"Dear father, you have made a promise and can't go back on it now. A promise must always be kept. Besides, it was my fault in the first place for asking for something so costly. Please tell the beast that I demand a feast of forty days for all the people in the city, with the finest foods and drinks, and music and dancing. It must be such a feast as no one in the country has ever heard of before. He must shower the guests with jewels."

She said this in the hope that the serpent would not be able to fulfil these conditions and would therefore have to withdraw from the bargain. But when Hajji brought his daughter's message the serpent readily agreed.

"I am more than obliged to my bride. Everything she wishes shall be done. I shall return for her in three days, by which time my palace will be ready for the guests."

The merchant sadly watched the serpent turn and glide off down the road, in anguish of heart that his beautiful daughter should be forced to marry so fearful and ugly a beast. The kind father wished he were dead for bringing such misery upon her.

On the third day a magnificent golden coach, drawn by four plunging black horses whose harness gleamed with gold and precious stones, drew up at the house. The serpent slithered out of it and knocked on the gate.

"Salaam, noble merchant," he greeted the unhappy father. "I have come to take you all to the wedding feast."

"We have been expecting you," replied the merchant, trembl-

ing with horror. "I am very pleased to hear that," said the serpent gaily.

Now Yasmin was brought out, pale as the moon and as lovely as a rosebud, dressed in a bridal gown of green and covered from head to foot in a golden veil that sparkled like sunlight. She came forward to greet her husband-to-be with her head held proudly, refusing to show her grief. But she shrank inwardly upon meeting his glittering unblinking gaze and seeing the scales of his fearful body gleam in the light. However, she took care that the serpent should not see this as she was helped into the coach and seated upon the green satin cushions inside. Cream-colored silk curtains were drawn across the window and the snake coiled itself beside her on the seat.

Behind the coach followed the rest of Yasmin's family in other carriages, and behind them the entire city followed in a long, winding procession. They journeyed and journeyed until they arrived at last to the wonderful garden where Hajji had found the jewels. Once more the great gate opened by itself and the coaches were driven through the garden to a palace whose walls were of gold, supported by columns of crystal. The grounds were entirely covered over with all manner of exquisite carpets woven with every variety of multicolored flower that had ever grown. All the guests agreed in their wonder that never before in this world had one man constructed so enchanting and beautiful a garden for his own private enjoyment.

All hesitantly entered the palace to the sound of soft music. In every room there were tables laden with rich foods and drink. And all around there were great bowls of golden and silver coins filled to overflowing, or piled high with various jewels, and from these the guests were invited to take as much as they wanted.

During the feast Yasmin sat silent and pale by the side of the host. When everyone had eaten their fill and had gone to rest, the serpent led her to a spacious apartment in which was an ivory bed hung with silks and brocades all fringed with pearls. Now they were alone Yasmin turned to her husband coiled beside her and said:

"O serpent, since I am married to you I will be loyal to you.

But please speak to me and tell me what you really are. Surely, with all your magic power, you cannot be merely a serpent? Surely I am not doomed to spend my whole life with a monster? ”

The serpent shook its head at her, and replied: “I cannot show you my real self unless you promise not to reveal my secret. If anyone else were to find out it would cause great unhappiness both to you and myself.”

Yasmin gave him her promise, and immediately the serpent began to circle round and round upon the floor, muttering a magic spell. The scaly skin fell away with a soft rustling sound like the wind in a cypress tree, and before Yasmin there stood the most handsome and gentle-faced young man.

“Here I am, Yasmin,” he said, taking her by the hand. “I am Prince Baharam, son of the Demon Shah. I left my own country, the Realm of Darkness, to come to the bright world of man. But remember now, if you ever tell anyone my secret I must leave you.”

“But why did you leave your own people for us? ”

“Because I had heard of the good qualities of men, their interest in learning and justice, their love for one another and their kind deeds. Demons, on the other hand, are cruel, conceited and selfish, interested only in themselves. They love ugliness and not beauty. Their only interest is in eating and drinking. Nothing pleases them more than war and the shedding of blood. So in the end I grew weary of my people’s wickedness and changed myself by a spell so that I could come and admire the good amongst men.”

Well, Yasmin was overjoyed to hear this and the couple settled down and lived happily together for two years. Baharam spent the daytime as a serpent coiled at his wife’s side, while she sat reading or playing music, painting or sewing. All their wants were supplied by unseen hands, and anything they wished for was immediately theirs.

But as the years followed each other like leaves in the wind and disappeared for ever like the flash of lightning, Yasmin began to long to see her family again: her father and her sisters, and the house in which she had spent her happy childhood

years. She wanted all her friends to know that her husband was no monster but a fine and handsome man. And most of all she wanted to rid him forever of his daytime skin with its ugly scales, for it was only in the evening that he changed into a prince.

It was lonely during the day with no one to talk to and nothing special to occupy her mind, and so she fell to brooding more and more. It worried Baharam that she had grown so restless of late and he asked her the reason.

"Is there no way of destroying your serpent skin?" she asked.

"Blossom of my happiness," he said to her gently, "let us be happy the way we are and forget the skin." But Yasmin persisted in pleading with him for this secret until he told her that the only way it could be destroyed was by burning it with the shells of the pistachio nut. Oh, she was happy then, and plotted to destroy his ugly disguise. Then all the world would know how handsome her husband really was.

But as often as she planned to burn the skin she was kept from doing so by the memory of the promise she had given Bahram that she would never reveal his secret. More and more upset, she wandered the gardens alone until she grew quite thin and pale. And finally she resolved she would go and visit her old home for a change. Baharam gladly gave her permission, and so next day the serpent and his beautiful wife drove off on the long journey to the merchant's city. As he left her Yasmin's husband reminded her in private of her promise:

"Listen to me, light of my life. Do not reveal my secret, no matter how much you may be questioned, or the happiness of us both will be destroyed."

Hardly stopping to reassure him of her loyalty, Yasmin turned and ran into the house. Then there was endless rejoicing as the family was reunited and everybody asked questions at once about what life with a monster was like. And what disbelief there was when she assured them she was very happy; and how some looked askance when she said everything she could possibly want was brought to her by unseen hands! How could a serpent do all this, they wondered; was he a magician in disguise?

There was one especially inquisitive aunt who had always been a troublemaker. She was forever asking Yasmin rude and silly questions; did the serpent ever try to swallow her? Did it breathe fire? But when Yasmin merely laughed at her, the crafty woman pretended to be angry in order to get more information out of her.

"Have you no respect, Yasmin?" she shouted. "How can you be happy with an ugly serpent like that? Love of luxury have blinded you so much that you have even forgotten you are a human being. Pearl of my heart, why should you, who are worthy of the hand and heart of the finest princes, waste your youth and beauty on a creature like that, a scaly, wriggling, glitter-eyed serpent? I suppose you only put up with him because you are so fond of your magic palace and fabulous wealth!

This was too much for Yasmin, and though she meant to keep silent she could not help crying out without thinking, "No, no, aunt, it isn't true! My husband isn't a monster, but the sweetest, gentlest, most powerful man in the world".

"I don't believe that for one moment," sneered the aunt. But she was only pretending. Secretly she was overjoyed that Yasmin had fallen into her trap and revealed the serpent's secret. And it was not long before she had wormed out of her all about Baharam's skin. When Yasmin realized how silly she had been, she burst into tears, moaning and beating her breast.

"Oh, what have I done? What have I done? I have broken my promise to my dearest husband."

"Nonsense, child!" cackled the old aunt. "Why should you promise him anything? If he is so handsome and excellent a man, why should he hide in a serpent's skin and shame you as the wife of a monster?"

"But what can I do about it?"

"Surely it would be simple to destroy the horrible skin?"

"But he has warned me that terrible things will happen if I do that."

"Never you believe him. That's just a story he's made up so he can stay in disguise."

"Now why should he do a thing like that?"

"Men have strange ideas, my child. But tell me, what does he do with the skin when he takes it off? "

"He hides it in a secret chest. I've seen him do it".

"Then it should be very easy to slip off while he's asleep and burn it".

Yasmin shook her head and frowned. "To do that I would need pistachio shells, and there are none in the garden."

"Don't worry," cried the aunt, "I can get you some. Burn up every inch of that skin and then you will always have a real husband by your side and both be much happier."

"But he will know I have broken my promise to him," said Yasmin, weeping again. Her aunt answered scornfully, "If he really loves you, then he will forgive you. You have nothing to worry about."

Finally Yasmin was convinced by her wicked aunt and so was quite eager to go back when the serpent came for her in the coach next day. Her aunt had given her a little packet of pistachioshells which she carefully hid from him, although she was normally a very honest girl. It was only her aunt's persuasions which had led her to do this at all. She so longed to free her husband from his horrid skin, and believed her aunt when she said that burning it would solve all their problems and bring them everlasting happiness.

Her husband, for his part, was delighted that Yasmin's visit to her family had seemed to do her so much good. He was so kind and attentive to her that she really felt very guilty breaking her promise to him. In fact she could not sleep for thinking about this when she got home, although she was very tired from the journey.

But at last, when Baharam was asleep, she slipped out of bed, taking care not to wake him, and took his skin and the shells her aunt had given her into the kitchen. There she started a fire with the shells, and when it was blazing away merrily she tossed the skin into the middle, watching it hiss and burn down to the very last scale. Now, she thought, as she looked at the ashes, we can live happily as our true selves without all this deception. But when she went back to bed and tried once more to sleep

she was troubled to find the thought did not bring her as much happiness as she had expected.

In the morning Baharam looked all over the place for his skin, and finally hurried into the bedroom where Yasmin pretended to be asleep to ask her if she knew where it was.

"No," she lied, trying to sound as calm as possible. "What does it matter? There's no need to worry. We can live perfectly happy without it."

But the prince turned white and said, "Yasmin, my life, I must put it on before dawn. Please help me find it."

"It's no use, Baharam. I burned it while you were asleep so we could live happily at last. Surely you're pleased?"

"Oh Yasmin, how could you do it! Is this the way you repay my love and confidence? Is this how much you trust me? How could you be so stupid, after I had warned you so solemnly, as to think that you could bring happiness by destroying it? For now you have burned my skin I have to go back to the Realm of Darkness, the land I came from, and I shall never see you again."

Then Yasmin realized how false her aunt's advice had been and threw herself at Baharam's feet, begging him to forgive her and stay. The tears streamed down her face and she thought she would surely die of grief. But her husband sternly refused. "Don't dare to talk of our love again," he said in his sorrow.

"Then take me with you," Yasmin begged him. "Take me to the Realm of Darkness beyond the far mountains and across the deep seas." But the prince only wept and shook his head.

"I cannot live without you, my prince. At least tell me some way I can follow you. I will go to the ends of the earth to find you, no matter how long it takes."

"There is no road, not even a path, to where I am going. I am now the slave of misfortune and cannot help you. But if you really love me, you can search for me. You must search for seven long years and wear out seven iron suits, seven pairs of iron shoes and seven staffs of iron. Unless you do this you can never hope to find me. There to the West," he said, pointing with his hand, "beyond the high mountains and over deep seas, lies my homeland, the Realm of Darkness. There my people, the



demons, live, and I must return to them. For if I stayed here any longer without my disguise they would find me out and tear me to pieces."

Yasmin wished she had never been born. She cried so much that her sobbing almost suffocated her and she forgot to breathe. "What a fool I have been," she thought. "But I deserve to be punished this way for not trusting my beloved husband, and I will suffer patiently. I had a jewel and did not recognize its value because I was not worthy of it... and so I have lost it."

So she dried her eyes and watched quietly as the prince went out into the garden and stood looking down at the ground, muttering a spell. He repeated it three times, and as he did so his handsome figure gradually faded into the air and his voice became a hollow whisper in the wind. He was gone, and with him disappeared the palace, the gardens, and all the beauties with which he had surrounded himself. And Yasmin had not even been able to say goodbye to him! She felt giddy. She was fainting.

When she opened her eyes and looked about she could see nothing but desert. In place of the garden there were only dry thorns. Dazed and frightened, she lay there groaning and weeping at her misfortune. But at last she started up, pale but ready to face whatever sorrows were in store for her, for it was of no use trying to bring back the past that had died. So she walked many days along the lonely desert tracks where there was neither sight nor sound of human habitation, suffering from hunger and thirst, until she came to her father's house.

There she threw herself weeping into his arms and told him of her misery, but try as hard as he might the poor man could do nothing to console her. What use were words against a grief such as this? For six months Yasmin lay in her bed, weak and sick from the sorrow and remorse that gnawed in her heart, her mouth open, her eyes staring, her arms outstretched. You might have thought she was dead, had you seen her.

But one day she lifted her head a little and saw outside the golden sun glowing in the brilliant blue sky. And then she thought with longing of her prince and remembered what he had said of the seven years' search she must make, until she had

worn out seven iron suits, seven pairs of iron shoes, and seven staffs of iron. She had to be up and on her way, searching for him by day and by night, to free him from the evil fate to which she herself had condemned him.

Her father unwillingly had the suits and shoes and staffs of iron made for her, for he did not wish to lose her again. But soon he had to kiss her goodbye and watch her trudge off in her iron clothes, supporting herself on an iron staff. For seven years she wandered over the face of the earth, searching through land after land by dark and by light, in sunshine, wind and rain, but always heading westward, the way her husband had pointed. And by the time she had worn out her seventh iron suit and her seventh pair of iron shoes, and the seventh iron staff was no more than a stump in her hand, she had come to the edge of the world beyond the far mountains and across the deep seas.

Yasmin could go no farther. Her head ached; her feet and her back ached; every bone in her slender body ached from so much walking year after year. She was so very, very tired; so weary she did not know whether she had arrived in the Realm of Darkness or not. And so she slept and slept for a whole day and night and woke to find she had arrived in a very strange place indeed. She was sitting in an enormous meadow and all the animals she saw grazing there, the sheep, the horses, the oxen, the camels, were colored black. And even the flowers, the trees and the very grass, were all different shades of black. Very curious Yasmin thought it! Perhaps this was the Realm of Darkness after all.

By and by a thick ugly man passed her. He had black curly hair out of which peeped two small black horns. Yasmin asked him who owned the meadow and all the animals there.

"Prince Baharam, son of the Shah of Demons," was his gruff reply.

Yasmin felt weak with relief that she had really come to the end of her search and lay down on the ground by the bank of a stream running under the trees. Even the water was black! And the light was so very feeble that you could hardly see by it. As she was wondering how she would find her prince now that she was in his land, a dark-skinned slave-girl came walking across the

meadow with a water-jar on her shoulder to fill at the stream. As she bent down Yasmin asked if the prince's palace was near.

"Salaam, sister," was her gentle reply. "It's not so far away as you think; just over there beyond the hills. I myself am one of his slaves come to fetch water for him to wash in."

Yasmin turned and saw in the distance the frowning walls of a castle built of black stone and jointed with iron. Huge black gates closed it in and she could see no way of entering without saying who she was, which might be dangerous. But she had an idea, and asked the slave-girl if she might drink from the jar she was taking to the prince, and while she had it in her hands she slipped off her marriage ring and dropped it to the bottom.

"Are you feeling ill, sister? You look so pale and weary," said the girl. Yasmin smiled and told her that though she had been through the most desperate miseries her troubles were now near their end. "Everything, both good and bad, comes to an end some day, sister. One must only have patience," observed the slave as she put the jar on her shoulder once more and set out for the castle.

When the water was brought to the prince he held out his hands above a black marble bowl and told the slave to pour the water over them. The falling ring caught the side of the bowl and when he looked in the direction of the sound he stared in amazement. "Surely I recognize this ring!" he thought as he picked it up and examined it. Yes, it was the ring he had given his Yasmin on the day they were married. And seven years had passed since he had seen her. How he had been counting the months and days! And she was here at last!

"Was there a stranger by the stream when you were filling the jar?" he asked the slave.

"Yes, sir, there was such a strange woman resting under the trees nearby."

"In what way was she strange?"

"She had on iron clothes such as I have never seen before. And on her feet she wore iron shoes which were quite worn through. And by her side was the bent stump of an iron staff. Her face was all weary and pale, but her eyes were like shadowy stars and her hair was as black as the night they shine in. She

asked for water and I allowed her to drink out of the jar. Did I do wrong? ”

“Far from it, my girl. It is always good to help someone in distress.”

Baharam’s heart was bounding with joy as he dismissed the slave. Now he was certain his beloved Yasmin was waiting at the fountain. He ran swiftly out of the castle, raced thru the gardens, rushed over the meadow, until he came to the trees by the brook and found Yasmin sleeping. Although seven long years of hardship had left their mark upon her, to the eager prince her saddened face was even more beautiful than that of the careless young girl he had married. It was a proof of her love for him.

The prince gazed down on her for a while, a slight smile playing on his lips, and then he knelt down to gather her in his arms, softly calling her name again and again. Yasmin opened her eyes and thought she was still dreaming. And when the dream went on and on, until she saw it was no dream, she cried out “I have found you at last, Baharam, my soul,” and fell back unconscious.

“You have fulfilled the test, star of my happiness,” came the prince’s reassuring voice. “I have been awaiting this moment for years with faith in the strength of your love to overcome so many difficulties. Often I have burned to escape from this cursed land of darkness, and only the thought that you would come at last to find me has held me here in the realm of demons, the most perilous place of all for you.”

“I don’t mind the danger, now that you are with me,” smiled Yasmin. “Everything looks calm and beautiful.”

“Do not be deceived by appearance. Evil lurks under the mask of beauty, disarming suspicion. Though my people have the form of human beings, they hate and destroy anyone from the world of men. I shall have to hide you by changing your form, as I once hid as a snake, until we find a chance to escape.”

But Yasmin was too happy to be frightened and put her confidence in Baharam, agreeing to what he suggested. So the prince waved his hands over her and uttered three magic words. Lo and behold, Yasmin had disappeared, and in her place was a sparkling golden needle! Baharam stuck it carefully into the

edge of his black coat and walked slowly back to the castle, talking to her as he went.

Now as the prince was sitting in his room whispering to his needle, his stepmother came knocking at the door. She peeped into every corner of the room with small bright eyes and twitched her nose as she entered.

"Oho, my son, what a funny smell in here. It's the smell of a Son of Adam, a human being. Do you not notice it too?"

"How could a human being get into this country?" the prince laughed. "You must be dreaming!" But the old lady was not convinced and went away shaking her head. The prince knew too well how powerful his mother was, so he changed Yasmin from a golden needle, which she might notice, into a little silky broom, and hid her in a corner. He hoped that this change would lessen her human scent. But his step-mother was still suspicious and came sniffing into his bedroom next morning.

"Oho, my son, there's still the smell of a Son of Adam in here. I'm sure you must be able to smell it too."

"No, how could there be? You must be mistaken. What funny ideas you have!"

But the stepmother was not to be put off. Baharam changed Yasmin to a piece of wood, but back she came next day, her small eyes darting about the room, to complain of the smell. Baharam changed Yasmin to a spray of flowers, and there was his stepmother next day still snuffling and puffing. He changed his wife to a golden thimble and hid her among his robes, but still his stepmother smelled her out.

The prince could stand it no longer, so when she next came by, looking here and there and wrinkling her nose up, he told her boldly:

"It just so happens, mother, that a poor *Daughter of Adam* whom I once knew in the world of men has arrived here in her travels around the world. I trust you will approve of my asking her to stay in the castle for a while. Please be gentle towards her, for the Children of Adam always behave well to their guests."

The Queen of Demons hid her anger and asked to see this

unexpected visitor. But when Baharam led Yasmin into her presence she looked so beautiful that the queen's rage and hatred knew no bounds. She looked down on her from beneath black and wrinkled brows with the most ferocious scowl, gave a tremendous sniff and sniggered nastily, before stalking out and vowing to blast her beauty forever.

Next morning the sinister old lady sent for Yasmin. "If you are to stay here," she growled, "you must undergo some tests to show you are worthy to be our guest." She scowled even more than the day before, till her hair stood right on end with the effort. Then she gave Yasmin two pieces of cloth, one white, and one black. "Take these and wash them," she continued, "so that the white becomes black and the black becomes white. I want this done by nightfall. Do you think you can do it, Daughter of Adam?"

"I'll try," said Yasmin dutifully, taking the pieces of cloth from the queen. All day long Yasmin washed at the fountain, scrubbing the pieces with so much care and patience that she did not notice the passing of the time. But the longer she washed them, the more white the white piece of cloth became, and the more black the black piece of cloth became, until she just gave up and looked at them blankly.

"Rest awhile Yasmin, and give me the cloth," said Baharam, suddenly appearing at her side and smiling. And while she sat and watched he cast a spell so that, in the twinkling of an eye, all the white came out of the white cloth, and he laid it on the black; and then all the black came out of the black cloth, and he poured it into the white.

"Your task is finished, dear one. Take these back to the castle and tell no one what you have just seen."

Yasmin did as she was told, hardly able to believe her eyes. Night had fallen and the wicked queen had returned to the castle, certain that Yasmin could not possibly have passed the test. But when she saw the pieces of cloth in her hand, her face turned even blacker with temper. "Your second test will be tomorrow," she snarled. "You'll find seven clay jars and a sieve by the fountain. I want you to fill all the jars with the sieve be-

fore the sun sets, so don't be slow about it. I'll soon be back to see how you've succeeded."

Well, everyone knows it's impossible to carry water in a sieve. How was Yasmin to fill those seven huge jars, each as tall as herself? The next day she trotted back and forth from the fountain with the sieve, but not one drop would it carry. She had almost given up hope by the evening when suddenly Baharam appeared from nowhere. Yasmin shrieked and ran towards him. In a moment he had picked up the sieve and passed his hands over it, muttering a spell. Every hole closed up at once and he ran between the fountain and the jars filling them all up. Then he waved his hands and said the spell backwards and all the holes were open again.

Once more the prince warned Yasmin to say nothing of what she had seen and left her. Just then the queen came stalking along and almost gnawed her lips off in fury upon finding all the jars filled and Yasmin sitting quietly beside them.

"Did you do all this by yourself, Daughter of Adam? How did you manage it? "

"It was done with the sieve, as you commanded, your majesty."

"Pooh! It seems to me that someone powerful has been helping you. Come here again tomorrow and sort out the heap of seeds you'll find here. And now go away. Bah! "

Next day Yasmin went into the garden, and there on the ground was the most colossal heap of seeds: wheat, rice, lentils, millet, poppy and vetch, were all mixed together. And though she tried for half a day she couldn't tell one from another, and the pile was just as high as when she started. Too tired to go on, she lay down on the floor and cried at the impossibility of her task.

"Why are you crying, flower of my life? " asked Baharam's voice beside her. Then, turning his face to the desert he murmured his magic formulas. Soon what seemed like a black cloud formed in the distance and grew bigger and bigger. Suddenly it was upon them and the air was dark with flying ants coming from every side. All of them settled upon the piles and set to work separating out the grains into separate heaps, hurrying and scurrying about their work. Before long not a seed

was out of place, and the ants flew away leaving everything neat behind them.

The queen was terribly angry when she came back and saw this. "It's evident I've not been making your tasks nearly difficult enough," she howled. "Tomorrow you must go to my sister's house, just beyond the field over there, and ask for the Give-and-Take-Box. Bring it back quickly to me, or it will be the worse for you." And she stalked off rolling her eyes and hic-coughing.

Before dawn next morning Yasmin set out to fetch the box, and as she was hurrying across the garden the prince came and joined her.

"Where are you going so early Yasmin? "

"I'm fetching the Give-and-Take-Box from your step-mother's sister, and I've got to hurry."

"Listen, my dear one, It's a trap and they're planning to trick you. But if you do what I tell you their plans will fail. Before you reach my aunt's house you'll pass a clump of bitter thorns. Salute it gently and pretend it's a rose. Then you'll come to a pool of dirty water. Take a little of this in your palm and declare it is rose-water. Further along the road you will come to a stable where you will see dogs chained up before a heap of straw and donkeys in the stalls, sniffing at a pile of bones. Put the bones before the dogs and the straw before the donkeys and then go on. When you come to the house you must open all the doors that are shut and close all the doors that are open. Then ask for the box and bring it back as fast as you can. But, most important of all, you must never, never open it, no matter how much you would like to see what is inside."

Yasmin promised to do all these things and hurried off. She stopped by the bitter thorn and gave it reverential salaam, pretending to sniff it with great relish and crying "Oh you are surely a rose of Paradise, you smell so sweet!" Then she stopped by the pond and complimented it on the excellence of its rose-water. At the stable she gave bones to the dogs and straw to the donkeys. Then she entered the house of Baharam's aunt, opening the doors that were closed and shutting the doors that she found open, and gave the queen's message. A sour and ugly



old woman brought her a tiny black box of papier-mache like a strange seven-pointed star and snapped at her to hurry back.

Hardly had she started on her way when the witch's voice shouted, "Catch her, doors, and crush her bones!" But the doors squeaked and groaned, "We shall do no such thing. You have unkindly neglected us for seven years, but she changed our positions so that we could rest. We are grateful to her."

So Yasmin passed safely through the doors and came to the stables. Behind her a harsh voice shrieked, "Catch her, dogs and donkeys; kick her to death and gnaw her to pieces." But the animals brayed and barked at her, "We would not dream of doing such a thing. For seven years you have tormented us with food out of our reach until we were starving, but she came in and fed us. We are too busy eating."

So Yasmin passed the stables in safety and came to the pond. "Catch her, you filthy pool, and drown her in your muddy depths," grated the voice behind her. But the pond said, "Certainly not. She complimented me on my fine rose-water, and all you ever do is call me names." The witch yelled with vexation and stamped her feet as Yasmin passed the pond safely and came to the bitter thorn bush. "Catch her, you sharp thorns, and rip her to shreds," wailed the witch.

"The very idea!" huffed the thorn-clump. "Why, only just now she greeted me politely and mentioned the excellence of my blossoms. You've never noticed them. All you ever do is break pieces off me to light your fire. Do your own dirty work, you nasty old woman."

So Yasmin escaped safely from all the dangers and passed into the field. But she was awfully curious about what she might find in a Give-and-Taxe-Box; try as she might she could not resist the temptation to just peep inside. "I'm sure Baharam wouldn't mind my taking a very little look, if I'm very quick," she thought to herself. So she just lifted a corner of the box. But to her horror the top leapt right off and she was instantly surrounded by a huge swarm of stinging flies buzzing angrily.

Yasmin shrieked and tried to get away, rolling in the grass and protecting her head with her arms. "Oh, oh, what a mis-

erable fool I am," she sobbed. "I've disobeyed him again, and look at the trouble I've caused! "

"Well, crying about it won't help you," said Baharam's voice beside her.

"How did you get here? " she asked, looking ashamed and getting to her feet. "Your tears called me," he said reproachfully.

"Alas, Baharam, I have failed you again. How can all these armies of flies ever be collected into the box? Oh, I'm always causing trouble! "

"Never mind, I know it was just your childish curiosity. You didn't mean any harm. And perhaps I can help you after all."

Then Baharam handed her the empty box and told her to hold it up without moving. Hardly daring to breathe, Yasmin did as she was told, and Baharam threw wide his arms and spoke a powerful word into the air. The flies gathered themselves into a column until not one was left buzzing about the fields, and then came spinning down to coil themselves into the box. Hastily the lid was clapped back on and Yasmin clasped her hands and thanked the prince over and over again.

Since Yasmin had been told not to waste time they hurried off to the castle together, Baharam telling her on the way of his stepmother's plot to keep him there always under her control.

"She is determined that I shall marry a cousin of mine."

"But you are already married to me, Baharam! "

She does not know that, and it would be dangerous to tell her. She would instantly order all her demons to destroy you. We must leave this land as soon as possible tonight."

Then the prince told her to get ready a bundle of big needles, a box of salt, and a jar of water. During a great feast to be held that night she was to stay in her room, ready to leave as soon as he came to her at midnight. This would be the best time, for then everyone would be occupied in eating and drinking.

When Yasmin handed the Give-and-Take-Box to the queen, it was received with angry and disappointed looks, and she went off immediately to her room, fearful and in sorrow. Out of her window she watched the demons dressed in black streaming into the castle from all directions for the feast. There was more

excitement, bustle and noise than on a battlefield or during a fire. The wide hall had been hung with black and was lighted with countless numbers of black candles. As soon as darkness gathered the betrothal ceremonies between Baharam and his cousin were held, and then all sat down to the feast.

By midnight the merriment was well under way. Baharam slipped off upon some excuse and came to the room where Yasmin was impatiently awaiting him, having got together the needles, the salt, and the water. Telling her to hurry before it was discovered that they had escaped the prince took her by the hand and they crept like cats thru the darkness, down the stairs and into the stable. Baharam saddled his favorite black horse and swung Yasmin up behind him. Away they went and were soon lost in the night.

Nobody had seen them go, for every available servant was busy in the castle serving at the feast, and everybody was making for too much noise for the sound of the horse in the yard to be heard. But next day the wicked queen discovered that she had been outwitted and Yasmin was gone. This was bad enough, but when it was discovered that the prince had gone with her not only the queen but every demon in the castle fell into the most terrible fury. She decreed that they must both be brought back and horribly punished and an army of giants was ordered to chase them and not to come back without them.

Meanwhile the prince was flying for his life, zig-zagging and changing direction to put off pursuers, and going by the wildest and most desolate routes out of the region. For half the next day they climbed through the mountains and descended into valleys, and expected soon to be safely away from the reach of the demons. Then they heard a terrifying roar behind them, and turned to see the giant army rushing towards them over a plain with tremendous bounds.

"Quickly, Yasmin," cried the prince, "scatter all of the needles onto the ground." And immediately she did this the whole desert burst out with bushes bearing long and terrible thorns. The furious giants were coming on so fast they fell into the middle of these before they realized what was happening. As the thorns pierced their hands and legs and feet they yelled

and bellowed with pain and floundered about, trying to escape from the trap.

Baharam and Yasmin sped on, but before long they heard the giants roaring even louder and more dreadfully behind them.

"Quickly, Yasmin," cried the prince again, "now throw the salt on the ground." No sooner had she done this when the surface of the desert turned into a sea of salt. The giants screamed angrily as they waded into this, for wherever they had been pricked and cut by the thorns the salt entered and hurt them even more, so they had to get out and go around.

Night was just coming on, and the runaways thought they had escaped at last, when they heard a howling behind them and the giants came hobbling over the horizon. They were so cross about all their hurts that they certainly meant to catch them, whatever happened, and pay them back.

"Quickly, Yasmin," said the prince once again, "now pour the water onto the ground."

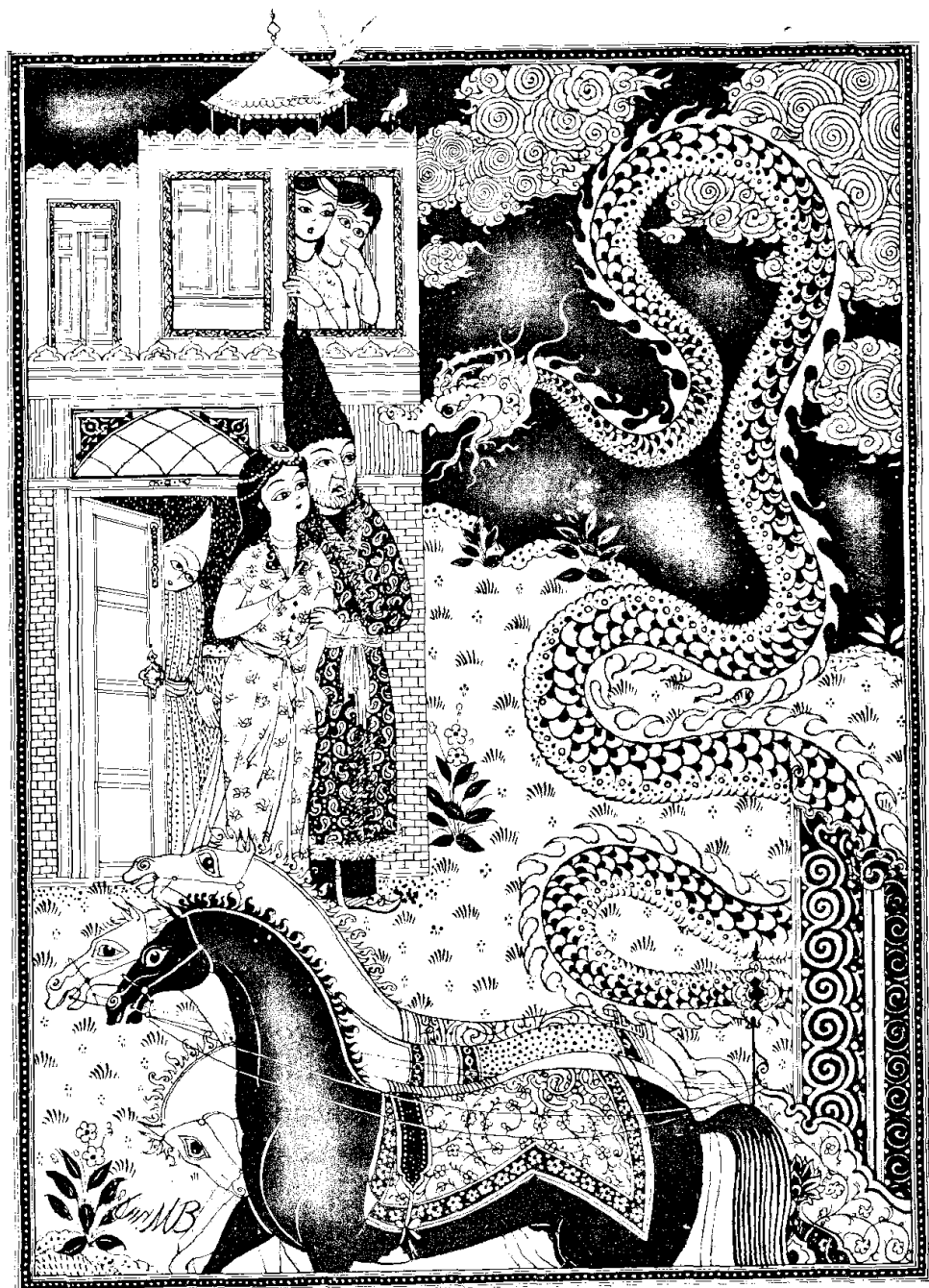
In the twinkling of an eye a mighty ocean rolled between them and their pursuers. But the giants were so blinded with fury that they all plunged into it and disappeared beneath the surface, bubbling and drowning. And then all was still and peaceful, for there were no more giants left.

Baharam's tireless horse galloped on through the second night and into the silvery dawn. It was one of those very clear mornings when you can see for miles. They found themselves on the edge of a vast green prairie, on the bounds of which was a deep dark wood. The air was cool and fresh, and there was not a breath of wind to disturb the petals of the wild tulips growing in the grass. Here they stopped to rest, and to feed and water the brave horse who had carried them faithfully so far.

"Star of my happiness," said the prince to Yasmin, "let us be glad, for we have defeated the forces of darkness and left behind us the night of rage and hate. Ahead of us lies the light of love; and where there is love there is peace and happiness."

So they took the way towards the city in which Yasmin's father traded as a merchant. Free from their misfortunes at last, they passed many years of happiness, and Yasmin bore the

prince three children whom they named Mehr, Raasti, and Aashti, that is to say, Love, Truth, and Peace.



# fatima and the crow

ONCE UPON A TIME there lived in Persia a little old woman named Fatima. Though she was smaller than a dwarf her heart was as big as an angel's, for her whole happiness lay in helping others who had less to live on than she had, and this was little enough in the first place. She would cook for those who were ill or lonely, take care of their little children, and give them advice in their times of trouble. There was no one who did not feel relaxed at the tender sound of her calm, sweet voice. All felt the more happy and smiled broadly whenever they heard her.

Now Fatima lived in a tiny house no bigger than a sieve. She would often sit on a small Persian carpet, under a figtree the size of a broomstick that grew in her garden, beside a pool no larger than the bottom of a cup. For when it is summer in Persia it is so hot that everyone sits outside to keep cool; and they sit on carpets just as we sit on chairs. On the shelf inside her one little room there was a mirror and a tiny, greenglass jar of rose water. And in one corner of the room lay a small mattress on which she used to sit crosslegged, when she had finished her housework, smoking a wooden pipe and enjoying the scent of the rose bush in her garden.

But one winter evening Fatima had crept to her bed as a violent storm burst in the darkened sky and released great torrents of water. When it was at its very worst there came a knock-knocking at her gate, so she quickly rushed out of the

door, still struggling to get her veil on straight, to see who was outside. And there a small, rain-soaked creature fell at her feet. It was a young crow asking for shelter from the storm.

"Ah, little grandmother," he said, "I am being beaten about by the wind and the rain. If you will shelter me tonight I promise to fly away as soon as the Muezzin (prayer-caller) summons the people at dawn."

"You poor creature, of course you can come in; I'm here to help," Fatima reassured him. "But what were you doing outside on a terrible night like this? Stealing pieces of soap, or walnuts from under somebody's tree, I'll be bound. Oh, you're a naughty bird! But still, you're welcome here, even though I have no warm nest to offer you."

The crow thanked her and flew in. He perched on a branch of the figtree, tucked his beak under one wing and fell asleep. In a few hours the storm wore itself out. Grey rain gave way to the pastel blue of early morning, and all was beautiful when Fatima got up and dressed in a clean, white house-veil of cotton. She found her guest busily eating a fallen fig and asked if he had slept well. The crow thanked her and said he had never slept better. There was a merry look in his black, shining eyes, and he really seemed a very handsome bird now that his coat was glossy and dry. From one glistening wing he pulled out a feather and laid it at her feet, saying "Keep this always. And when you need anything, throw it in the air and follow it until it brings you to me." Then he flew off towards the sun and disappeared.

Time passed, and Fatima was so busy she thought no more of her visitor, until one day she began to wish she could do even more to help the people in her town. Then she remembered the feather the crow had given her and opened the box in which she had kept it. Immediately the feather sprang up and floated out of the door with Fatima running hither and thither after it. Far and wide they travelled past fields of red tulips and large white ox-eye daisies. Nightingales and sparrows were flying about and were amazed to see the little woman running after a feather bobbing thru the air.

"We thought only eagles could fly so fast," they whispered to one another, and flew away in fear.





Then they passed a cemetery where a black rat with burning red eyes was sitting on a tombstone. He laughed and laughed and shouted after her, "Oh you do look funny, you little old woman, running after that feather! "

"Mind your own business, you nasty little beast," answered Fatima, who was quite offended.

Next they came to a ruined palace where the fragments of blue tiles on the walls gleamed in the sun. Here a young dervish boy was walking, and he too was amused to see Fatima and the feather. "Oh look, how boring," he said; "there goes a little old woman chasing a feather."

"Don't you know it's rude to go poking your nose into what doesn't concern you? I know what I'm about," Fatima snapped back at him.

After they had travelled a long, long way, they came at last to a cave on top of a mountain. Much to her horror Fatima saw a frightful creature ten times the size of the largest man in the world sitting at the entrance. Its skin was like rhinoceros-hide; teeth the size of plough-shares glistened between its black lips. It was a *deev* or bogle with two horribly pointed horns sticking out from beneath its bushy hair and wearing only a skirt-cloth which reached down to its rough knees, beneath which stuck out an enormous pair of flat, bare feet.

Fatima was frightened, for she had heard that a *deev* would roast a man over a slow fire whenever he felt like a 'snack. His strength was greater than a thunderstorm, his laugh could shake the ground, and when he roared there were earthquakes all over the world. Lightning is said to be the flame of his anger.

Trembling all over, Fatima knelt before him and greeted him with "*Salaam* (Peace be with you)".

"Ahaagh," growled the *deev*. "If you had not greeted me thus I would have nibbled you all the way to the ground, beginning with your ears. What are you looking for here? "

"I'm just following my feather," answered Fatima, who was shaking like a leaf.

"And what are you trembling for? " thundered the monster.

"I've come a long way and the wind is cold" she replied, trying to be brave. Then the *deev* gently invited her into the

cave. Fatima went in fearlessly and was overjoyed to find the crow perched on a rock inside. He greeted her happily and asked if anything was wrong, so Fatima told him how she was unhappy because she could not help others more. The crow seemed very pleased to hear this.

"Oh little grandmother, useful to all," he said cheerfully, "now I can repay your kindness to me."

Then he gave her a hen. "It lays golden eggs every morning," he told her, "and will do so for as long as you live."

Fatima thanked him with delight and went away with the hen tucked carefully under her arm and the feather skipping ahead. When she got home she put the feather back in its box and made a soft nest for the hen, feeding it with grains of rice and crumbs of bread. Next day she found her first golden egg gleaming in the nest and was overcome with excitement. Now she could help the people in the town even more.

Before long everyone was talking about Fatima's hen. They'd never heard of anything like it before. People came to see it from all quarters of the land and everyone who was in want was given what he needed. Some thought it was a miracle, and others scoffed that it was merely a freak of nature. But the wise old men shook their white heads thoughtfully, for they knew it would not be long before the chief citizen, the Kad-Khoda, came to hear of it. And they sighed because, though he was very rich, he was never satisfied with what he had but always wanted more.

This villain had a great belly which shook like a blancmange when he walked, and his long beard swept the ground before him like a besom, flopping up and down whenever he opened his mouth. And this was very often because he was forever swallowing whatever he could cram into it.

Now when news of the hen finally reached his ears, the Kad-khoda decided that a lowly woman like Fatima did not deserve to own such a wonderful thing. It ought to belong to him, he thought. So he sent for her, and when she obeyed his summons he asked, "Sister, is it true you possess a remarkable yellow hen?"

“It is indeed, Honourable Sir.”

Then he demanded to see it and Fatima innocently brought it to him. Pretending to admire its feathers, he asked her to leave it overnight and she agreed, willing to oblige him and trusting it would be returned safely to her home.

Next morning the Kad-khoda was delighted to find himself the richer by one golden egg. “How nice it would be if I could have one every morning” he thought, and then he decided to play a very mean trick. So he sent Fatima another yellow hen and kept the real one himself. But the morning after, Fatima discovered she had been deceived for there was no golden egg in the nest. “Surely the Kad-khoda wouldn’t cheat his people like this,” she thought, and she went to him and meekly explained that a mistake must have been made. Then the Kad-khoda’s face grew red and his beard whisked up and down like a danger-signal and he ordered that she be driven from his presence.

Poor Fatima cried without stopping all the way home. Then she let out the feather again and followed it to the cave in the mountain. This time the deev was glad to see her and asked her in to where the crow was sitting on his rock. When he had listened to her troubled story he darted his beak into a corner and dragged out a small copper pot and spoon. “These are even better than the hen,” he said. “Put the pot over the fire and stir it with the spoon while wishing for whatever you want, and it will be yours.”

Then Fatima returned home happily with the pot under her arm and the feather bobbing before her. By-and-by the hungry gathered at her door and were given whatever they asked for. Within a few weeks there were no more thin, sad faces. Even the animals and birds had sleek coats! And the people spent their time working for other necessities of life now they no longer had to worry about food. But as all this was going on the Kad-khoda began to notice it. He soon realized that the pot was even more valuable than the hen he had stolen and began to make plans to get hold of this also.

One morning Fatima was amazed to see the fat chief citizen followed by a great number of servants approaching her humble home. But because she was gentle by nature she received him

politely. The Kad-khoda said he was sorry about their misunderstanding in the past but he craftily avoided mentioning anything more about the hen. Then Fatima asked him what he would like for lunch. "Chicken kebab, turkey and rice, and fruit" he answered immediately; then he thought a moment and added "Yellow-rose halva and lemon sherbet with sugar and ice".

Fatima went into the kitchen and very soon returned with trays heaped with the very food he had asked for. This made his eyes dance and his mouth water. As he was sitting on a rug and eating he looked into the street and noticed his men were eating too. Signalling craftily to one of the servants he trusted most, he told him to see where the food came from. So the servant crept to the kitchen window and peeped in just as Fatima was stirring her pot. When the chief had finished and thanked Fatima the servant joined him in the street and told him "Believe it or not, Honorable Sir, she simply stirred the pot and wished for what she wanted."

"Very well," the Kad-khoda muttered to himself, "I must have this marvellous pot too."

Next morning Fatima received a friendly message from the chief citizen asking if she would lend him the pot. Well, she knew that would be the last she'd see of either pot or spoon, but she didn't want to quarrel with him and so she let him have them. As she expected, a different pot and spoon were returned to her a few days later, and she could not work her magic any more. Once more she followed the feather to the crow's cave, crying.

"I have lost... lost the...", she sobbed without being able to get it out. "Oh, that man, that crafty man! He does wrong so cleverly that no one can accuse him! "

"Unfortunately there are some who will only do good if they are forced to," the crow comforted her. "But here is a weapon which will not only teach the Kad-khoda a lesson, but get your pot and the hen back as well."

Then the crow gave Fatima a hollow golden pumpkin and told her how to use it. Fatima was very relieved because now she could make the Kad-khoda undo all his wrong and she went straight to his mansion and demanded to see him. When he re-

fused she raised her voice and shouted "I'd advise you to see me, Sir. It would be to your advantage."

The Kad-khoda was amused at the little woman's daring and ordered his servants to let her in, mockingly asking what advice she had to give him.

"Tell the truth and shame the Devil" she said. "Give me back my hen and magic pot".

"My advice, little woman, is to take to your heels before you make me angry" he replied.

"I will be your humble servant and take your advice after you have taken mine" she said firmly.

The Kad-khoda demanded to know what she meant by this.

"I live to help others and want those things for their sake."

"Very interesting" said the crafty man. "Now let me tell you something. We live in a rough world where everything belongs to the strong, not the weak." He laughed so loud when he said this that he could be heard all over the mansion. But Fatima was angry. "Listen", she said, "that's not only wrong, it's insulting. I may be small but I remember the great words of the poet:

*Since men all come from the same source  
They are one body's separate parts:  
Hard fortune strikes no limb alone.  
For all will sense his loss of peace.  
The one who does not feel the misery  
Another feels cannot be called a man.*

The servants thought this a very rude thing to say to their master, who lost his patience and shouted with rage: "Enough of you, little woman!" His brows came angrily together and everybody but Fatima was very frightened.

"All right," she said threateningly, and quickly tapped the golden shell of the pumpkin and murmured the magic words that the crow had taught her: "Out, out, hundred mace-bearers, and defeat the oppressors."

Suddenly the mansion was crowded with huge African mace-bearers and everybody froze with fear. The Kad-khoda's fierce expression changed to terror. At Fatima's order the fat citizen and his men were chased out into the streets, all making as

much noise as an Oriental bazaar (Eastern market) when a camel-caravan arrives. Everybody was happy to see their hated chief and his followers running away. Pale and meek as a newborn baby, the Kad-khoda came crawling to Fatima and asked her to call off her warriors.

"Not until you give back what you took from me," she said. Immediately they were brought to her and she spoke the magic words: "Inside mace-bearers, inside the pumpkin, maces." Back they went like a puff of smoke, and Fatima walked off slowly down the street surrounded by cheering people, leaving the Kad-khoda still trembling.

Once again the town became beautiful, bright and clean. Small houses gave way to large homes surrounded by white walls enclosing beautiful gardens full of flowers and trees. Schools and playgrounds were built. Everyone was well, busy and happy. As for Fatima, she did not allow all this to go to her head but was content to sit on her rug under the figtree by the tiny pool in her small house and smoke her wooden pipe, smelling the roses and glad that everything had come out right in the end.

"This is good enough for me," she said.

# the adventures of little pea

IT HAPPENED a very long time ago, when the world was young, that a wood-cutter's wife gave birth to a baby girl hardly more than an inch tall. Her face was no bigger than a pea and she had twinkling eyes, soft black hair, snow-white skin and a very quick wit. But her voice was as loud as yours or mine, which is very unusual in a girl only one inch tall.

Her parents loved her very much and didn't mind about her tiny size at all. They called her Nokhodoo (little pea). Unfortunately, they were very poor and had to sleep on mats made out of date leaves. They made a little bed of these for their daughter too and it wasn't much bigger than a postage stamp.

Nokhodoo's father gathered dried bushes in the forest all day long. Then he would load them on his mule's back and take them to market to sell as firewood. This way he did not make very much money, and he had nothing beyond his mule and what a few pennies a day will buy, which isn't much.

The village bazaar or market in which he traded was a very pleasant place in the dim light of sunset. A colored paper lantern was hung on the wall of each of the shops and outside them the farmers, peasants, porters, and even the chief villager would sit on benches, smoking their long wooden pipes. Here, too, people sold their goods while sipping tea from small glasses, having unloaded their mules, their donkeys, and the occasional camel. Farmers sold vegetables and fruit, gardeners their

flowers, butchers bought sheep, weavers purchased wool and various herbs for dyeing the threads of their famous carpets. But the woodcutters, who worked hardest of all and were the most tired, made the least money. This was the hard life that Nokhodoo's father led.

As the little girl grew older and began to understand her parents' troubles she naturally wanted to help. Altho she was too tiny to help with the housework or to gather wood, she had an idea of how she could be most useful. "Surely" she thought, "someone with a voice so loud for her size, and sweet-sounding as well, can do something? Maybe I can work with the mule." So one day she said to her father "Oh Daddy, I've been doing so much thinking. Would you please let me drive the mule when you go to the forest? "

Her father smiled through his grey-black beard and the wrinkles about his thoughtful eyes grew deeper. It was true that it was becoming more difficult each year to exchange his wood for bread, yoghurt, cheese and water melon in the summer, and for pomegranates, rice and meat in the winter, but he could still manage. No, he smiled, he couldn't let Nokhodoo drive the mule to the forest.

"Oh, please, Daddy! I may be tiny, but I'm equal to anybody when it comes to intelligence."

Her father looked at his wife, who was smiling in approval too, and said "Well, at least we can let her try." Then the mother got the mule ready for the journey and lifted her up to its ear, wishing her good luck. Off went Nokhodoo, whispering instructions into the mule's ear in her gentle voice.

Before long she had become a most efficient little mule-driver and the animal had become very fond of its new mistress. One day a man saw the mule and was most bewildered because he could hear a voice but couldn't see a rider. He followed the animal curiously into the forest until it stopped by a pile of dried bushes.

"Here I am, Daddy," shouted the voice. Out of the forest ran the woodcutter, lifting the child from the mule's ear on two strong fingers and placing her gently on the ground. Nokhodoo



ran to-and-fro in the bushy grass and finally alighted like a butterfly on a chip of wood, chirping "Oh, I feel so fresh."

The stranger could hardly believe his eyes and ran excitedly to the woodcutter. "I'll give you a good price for this marvellous creature," he shouted.

"Ah no," smiled the woodcutter, "this is my daughter, my only child. I couldn't sell my own flesh and blood, could I? "

But the man wouldn't believe him. He reached into his pockets and brought out a fistful of coins. "I'll give you a hundred pieces of gold," he exclaimed.

Nokhodoo was listening to all this with an angry look in her eyes. Scrambling up to her father's shoulder and tweaking his ear, she whispered, "Please take it, Daddy. I'd like to teach this man a lesson, and I promise you I'll come back safely."

Still the woodcutter wouldn't agree and the stranger doubled his offer. Nokhodoo tweaked her father's ear and whispered to him again until he finally took the money and went home, leaving her with the stranger who placed her gently on his palm.

"I'm rather tired of being up here, Sir," she said after a time. "Would you mind putting me down and letting me walk for a bit? "

Actually Nokhodoo wanted to get away from the man, so when he had put her carefully on the ground she wandered about, her quick eyes looking for a mouse-hole. Seeing one she quickly scurried into it, shouting back, "He who buys free people deserves to lose his money," before she disappeared from sight.

"Hey, come out of there," the man shouted angrily, glaring at the hole. Not an answer did he get. "I'll find her," he growled in determination, getting down on his hands and knees and tearing at the hole with a stick. But even when he changed this for a knife and dug deeper and deeper he couldn't get at her. "I've been fooled by a creature hardly one inch tall" he raged as night blanketed down upon the forest. "Oh well, it serves me right, I suppose."

It was still dark when Nokhodoo finally climbed out and took shelter under a broken piece of jug just right for her. As

she curled up and went to sleep she thought "I'll go home in the morning."

It was only midnight when she was startled awake by the sound of voices. Peeping out from the jug she was dazzled by a fire made of dried leaves and saw four men sitting crosslegged around it. She thought this was very strange and listened to what they were saying.

"Let's go; it's almost time," said one.

"Yes, surely that pious pig and his servants ought to be asleep by now," said another.

Nokhodoo's heart beat very fast as she realized what these men were doing, but she crept up close to them and shouted, "Take me with you, gentlemen. I might be able to help you in some special way."

All the men yelled with fright and jumped up to see who had spoken. But of course they couldn't. "Who's there?" they challenged.

"Someone who can help you," a voice whispered at their feet.

"Where are you? Can it be a genie?"

"I'm no genie. I'm flesh and blood like yourselves," laughed Nokhodoo, jumping into the firelight. She could see that the men were not dressed like her father but wore tight robes which hung to their knees, wide shawls about their waists, and trousers tucked into the upper part of their boots. On their heads they wore small round felt hats. But she wasn't half as surprised at the way they were dressed as they were amazed at seeing her.

"Well, will I do?" she said, smiling.

"That depends on what you can do."

"Lots of things. Isn't it important to have someone to open the gate of the house you want to burgle? I can creep into places where even a mouse would get stuck."

The men looked at one another and agreed that this would be useful, so one put her on his shoulder and they took her with them to the village. There Nokhodoo made out the awnings over the flat roofs of one-storey houses made of sun-dried mud bricks and in the middle of a field near the road the rich man's house whose money they meant to steal. It was a high building covered in shining white plaster, and on it walnuts were spread

out to dry. Nokhodoo slipped inside the gate, climbing up inside to lift the latch and let the men enter.

The courtyard was paved with brick, and there was a star-sparkling pool whose corners were planted with shrubs, roses, lilies, and lilacs. Giving the all-clear signal Nokhodoo ran to this, shouting, "Come on, men, hurry up! I'll find the gold and bring it to you."

"Shut up, you little fool. Keep quiet," they hissed in fury, blundering about and looking vainly for her in the darkness. But Nokhodoo took no notice and ran all over the place laughing and shouting even louder. Soon everyone in the house was awake and the robbers trumbled over each other in panic as they scuttled out of the gate. Then she latched it behind them and climbed into the cup of a daffodil to watch what happened. A sleepy servant carrying a candle came out, only to find the courtyard as empty as the house and the gate locked. He returned to his room muttering to himself and Nokhodoo left her perch and crept to a storeroom where she lay down on a pile of fresh lucerne-grass and straw left there to feed the animals.

Early next morning a servant-woman came out to feed the cow and unfortunately gave it a bundle of hay in which Nokhodoo was still sleeping. She woke up to find herself in the dark wet cave of a cow's mouth. Wondering where she was, she had to run to avoid the chewing of the great white teeth and tumbled down a long slippery passage all the way into the cow's stomach, which felt just like a warm room.

"Don't eat any more" yelled the little prisoner as the cow continued to chew and swallow. Now a voice coming out of the cow horrified the poor woman who was trying to milk it. She tripped over her pail and rushed out of the barn trembling all over, leaving her long pink head-veil lying on the ground.

"Oh, Sir, the cow talks in our own language, I've heard it," she shouted to her master.

No one really believed her, but the rich man's wife, his children, even he himself, ran to look at the cow. They were so shocked that they didn't even notice the woman was not wearing her veil, although it was against custom for servants to appear bare-headed before their masters. When they all arrived Nokhodoo was still

pleading with the cow. "Stop it, you hungry thing, stop," she shouted, but it just went on eating.

When the master thought he heard the cow talking his eyes bulged and his mouth dropped so far open that his long beard, dyed orange with henna, looked even longer. He jumped back in horror and his freshly-pressed satin robe caught on a piece of wood and tore; this tripped him up and he fell with his slippers flying off in different directions.

"The Devil has got into the cow, without a doubt," he gasped, picking himself up. "Call for a butcher." A butcher came and soon brought the life of the haunted cow to an end. The meat and the skin were removed and a servant threw its stomach into a field.

Nokhodoo saw a dim light at one end of her room at last and began to make her way towards it. But as chance would have it a hungry wolf was passing by and he swallowed down the stomach just as she was about to climb out. And so she found herself in darkness again. By this time she was feeling dizzy and wondered where on earth she had got to. But she was in luck for a passing hunter shot the wolf and skinned it, leaving the carcase behind. Then a horde of rats leapt on the body and started tearing it to pieces and eating it. Nokhodoo only just managed to creep between the ribs and escape.

Out in the air once again she stretched and thought how lucky she had been. Then she started looking for some water so she could have a bath, for she was a very clean little girl. She came upon a camel's hoof-print filled with rain-water and was soon splashing happily about in her outdoor bathtub. After this she went to sleep in the petal of a wild flower and didn't wake until the next morning.

Nokhodoo was wakened by the cheerful songs of the birds. Stretching her hands above her head, she sighed "Oh dear, I hope my parents aren't worried." She was very hungry, but getting home was most important. As she went she frowned to herself. What a pity it would be to go home without a present. Where could she find one? Just then she heard two white doves talking in a nearby orange tree. Believe it or not, they were talk-

ing about her! Even with such tiny ears she couldn't be mistaken in a thing like her own name.

"Such a clever girl," one of them was saying. "She may be tiny but she's done wonderful things. Just imagine anyone so small helping her parents and driving away robbers!"

"I do agree," said the other. "How about giving her a little present?"

"What a good idea. There's that treasure we know about buried under the ground."

"But how is she to get it?"

"Oh, just by digging."

Then both the birds opened their wings and flew away. Nokhadoo was very happy. After all, it's not every day that two birds tell you where to find a buried treasure. She hardly wasted a minute finding a sharp piece of stone to use as a shovel and then she began digging with all her might. On and on she went until it was late in the afternoon when, to her relief, she saw a small iron door peeping out underneath the dirt. But when she tried it was too heavy to lift. That didn't bother her for long, however. There is an answer to everything if you're patient. A handsome shepherd boy was sitting on a rock not far away and playing the flute. Nokhadoo called to him and he came over and heaved at the door which slowly lifted up. Then he picked her up and carried her down some crooked stairs into a deep underground chamber. What a strong fellow he is, she thought, bobbing her head in thanks.

There on the floor were seven earthenware jars full to the very top with gold and precious stones. Nokhadoo grinned. "I must go home at once and tell my parents the happy news." Then, as she was a generous girl, she told the shepherd boy that he could have half the treasure for helping her; it was only fair.

"But" he objected, "I only lifted the door for you. You found it."

"I don't mind. Take your share home right away, before anyone finds out and tries to take it away from you."

"But I can't leave my sheep like that. People trust me to look after their property, and that's better than any treasure."

"But at least take one jar as a gift from me."

“No, I can’t even do that. Too much money at my age would make me lazy.”

Nevertheless Nokhodoo kept insisting until he agreed to take one jar, but not until the next day. No one noticed her as she walked homewards through the fields past the peasants working away in their white cotton shirts and black trousers under the afternoon sun. But she was rather glad about not being seen since her pink blouse was torn and her long purple skirt was dragging in the dust.

At last she began to recognize where she was. First there was the river where her mother and father bathed, then the forest where her father worked, and at last the dusty yellow road that led to the village and her own home with its low walls reflecting the last rays of the sun.

Her parents were at their meal as she wearily entered and didn’t notice her at first. There was only the dim light of the candle on a shelf that lit the table where yoghurt, beetroot, and bread lay before two humble dishes and spoons made of orange-wood. But their faces shone brighter than the candle when they saw Nokhodoo standing at their side.

“Are we dreaming, or is it really her?” they exclaimed, embracing her in a shower of kisses.

Nokhodoo clung to them and said how sorry she was that her absence had made them unhappy. “I too have been sad away from you. I’ve had to put up with all sorts of things. It will take me days to rest and recover before I can tell you my adventures. But first I have a little present for you in a field not far from here.”

Next day Nokhodoo greeted her old friend the mule with a happy kiss, and they loaded it with a saddle-bag of woven wool. Off they went gaily to find the underground chamber. Nokhodoo was rather disappointed that the shepherd boy was not there to claim his reward and said “Let’s just take six jars, Daddy. One day he might come back and then he’ll find there’s still something there for him.”

No one was happier or more content than these three ever afterwards. The parents would not have exchanged their child for a dozen other daughters; nor did she wish for other parents.

**“I’ve learned a lot from my travels,” she used to say, her tiny eyes shining. “But the most important thing I discovered is that no matter how small a person might be, he or she can do a great many things in life.”**

# the lion and the donkey

ONCE, long, long ago, there lived a donkey who hated work. Actually there are very few donkeys that like it, but this donkey hated work so much that it worked very hard to avoid doing any work at all! No matter how hard he tried, the donkey's master could never get it to stand up and carry a bundle of wood, it just kept sitting there. And even if he managed to slip it on when the donkey was not looking, it just shook it off and bounded about going "hee-haw" while the poor man tried to reload it.

The master decided he would teach this donkey a lesson, so he only fed it on bread and water, but it still wouldn't work, even though it became so thin it looked like a bag of bones. At last the master became so angry he loaded the animal onto a cart and dumped it in the jungle.

"There, that'll show you, you stubborn beast," said the man.

"You're right," the donkey answered, "I'll never work again. And by the way, thanks for the ride; it's much better than walking! Come and visit me some time when I'm fat and well fed."

Never had he said a truer word. In less time than it takes to eat a few square meals the donkey started bulging. After a time he was so fat that his thin little legs could scarcely carry him. He was as happy as a lazy donkey can be, which is very happy and very lazy.



But one day he heard the awful roar of a lion who was living in the same jungle. "Oh, dear, there goes my jungle paradise," he thought to himself. And then he stopped and started stroking his hairy chin with his hoof. "Perhaps it isn't after all; oh no, this old donkey's got a trick or two up his sleeve yet!" Then he lifted his fat face to the sky and began to bray: "HEE-HAW, HEE-HAW."

Now the lion was very fierce and king of all the beasts, but he had never heard a donkey braying before, and was most surprised. "What on earth's that noise?" he asked himself. "I thought I ruled this jungle, but I've never met the animal that can make a noise like that, and I hope I never do."

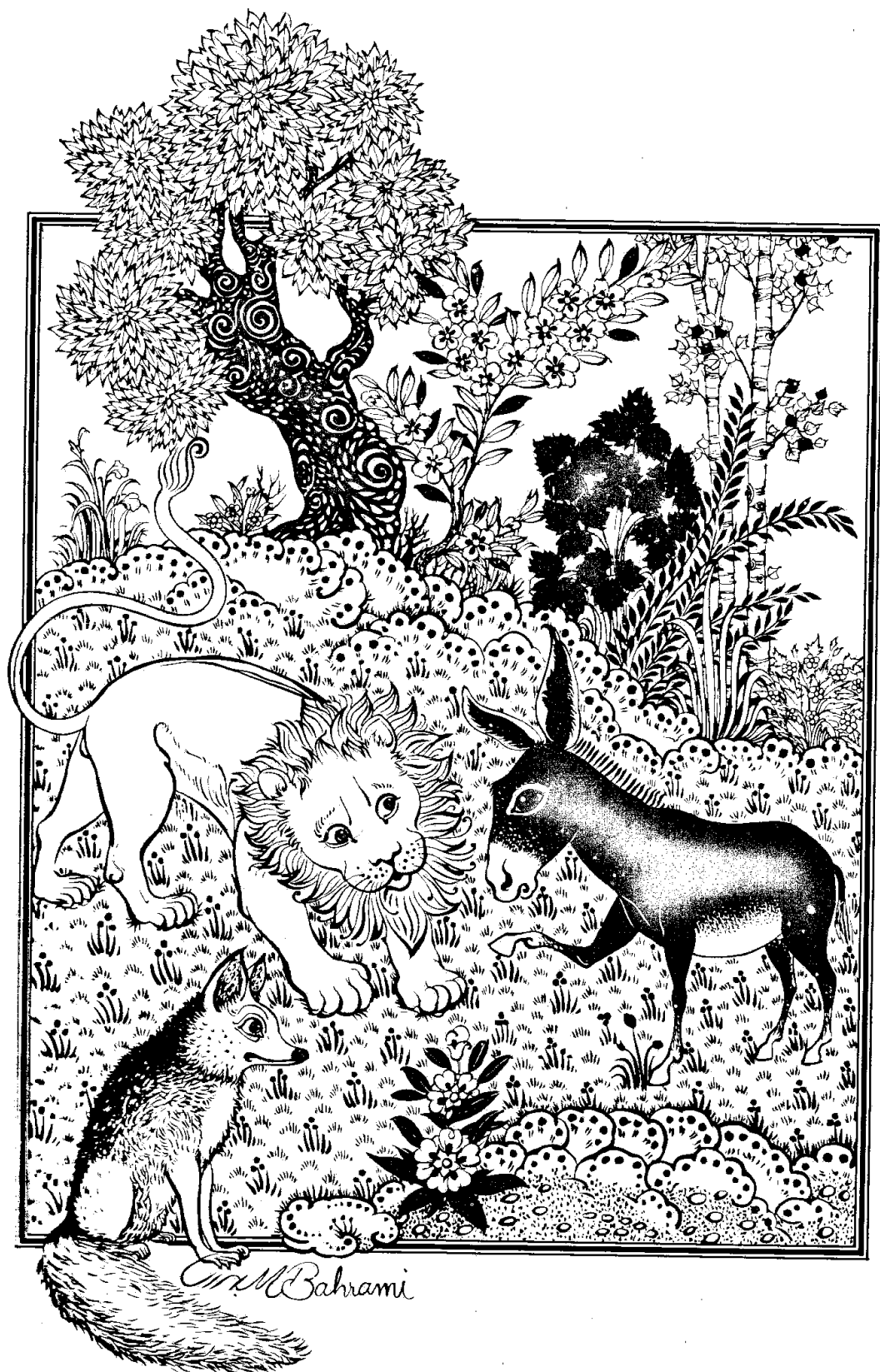
At last they did meet on another day and the donkey simply pretended he had not seen the lion and began to nibble at some grass nearby. "This must be the one with the terrible voice," thought the lion. "Just look at his lofty dignity. Good heavens, he must be able to hear everything with those long ears, and see everything with such big eyes. I'll have to make friends with him if I'm going to save my hide." And so the lion crept nearer, even though he was frightened.

The donkey, however, was even more terrified. He thought his last day had come and couldn't bite the grass he was having for lunch because his teeth chattered so much. But the lion's respectful greeting soon changed this. "My praises, O Eminent Creature of Noble Descent," he began. The donkey saw immediately that the great beast had been taken in by his manner and proudly raised his head and lifted his long ears.

"And, who, pray, may you be, creature of shadows?" he demanded loftily.

The poor lion grew even more frightened. "Mighty Lord," he replied, "my name is Lion and I have come to offer you my humble services."

"Well, well," thought the donkey, "he might be right after all. First I fooled a man and now this stupid lion." Then he looked the lion up and down and said to him "What? You serve me? How absurd! The only difference between you and an ordinary cat is your mane... and perhaps your tail. But I ought to be gentler with my inferiors. All right, lion, you can stay on one



condition: that you don't offend me more than twice. The third time you annoy me I'll tear the heart and liver through your spineless back."

The horrified lion could only gasp, "Certainly, Your Majesty, anything you say." The new Lord-of-the-jungle beckoned to the lion with one ear and paraded down the path. Behind him trotted the humble lion. And as they walked each wondered how he could get away from the other. At noon the lion stood guard as the donkey slept. "So mighty a person must need a great deal of rest," he thought. "Since he has such a large body he must have wandered far and wide throughout the world and be rich in wisdom and experience."

When a fly settled on the donkey's nose the lion flicked it away with the tip of his tail. The donkey opened his eyes and almost fainted at seeing him so near, but the lion, who did not realize this, quavered, "O master with the mind of a sage, I just chased off a fly who dared to alight on your august nose."

But the donkey frowned at him and said indignantly, "How dare you disturb the singer of lullabies who was lulling me to sleep! You have committed your first error. Be careful it doesn't happen again."

Your slightest wish is my command, Your Majesty," said the trembling lion. Later on the lion came nervously pacing before the donkey with a problem.

"My master, please punish this ill-mannered tortoise who eats my kill and goes into his stone house, slamming the door in my face, when I attack him."

"Where is this tortoise," inquired the lofty donkey.

"The lion pointed him out and the donkey sneered, "Does this tiny creature annoy you?" Then he turned his back and kicked with his hind legs, knocking the tortoise twenty yards into the air.

"Ah," thought the lion, "was there ever an animal like this before? He considered the tortoise too unworthy to face so he merely turned and gave him this awful treatment from behind. I must never make him angry with me."

Every now and then, especially in the hot hours of the day, the donkey would leave his clearing and walk under the cool

trees of the jungle. But one day he slipped on the edge of a swamp and fell into water well over his head. Jumping in after him, the lion got under his fat stomach and lifted him back to the shore. Now the donkey could not swim, but, even though he had been saved from drowning and should have been grateful, he roared, "You're interfering in my personal affairs again."

"But master," said the lion, "you were in danger of drowning."

"What, me?" said the donkey, throwing back his head and laughing. "Don't you realize, you silly creature, that I was visiting my father's grave? I wanted to read a prayer over his tomb. Now you have offended me twice with your interference. Leave my presence before you do it again."

"I obey your slightest whim, Your Majesty," whimpered the lion, and crept away with bowed head.

"What a clever creature I am," the donkey said to himself. "But he's dangerous and I'll have to get rid of him by accusing him of something else."

"Woe is me," the lion was saying to himself, "I brought this trouble on myself. If only I hadn't crossed this enormous animal's path. I must find a way to escape from this jungle."

Next morning a traveller noticed the donkey grazing near the road and crept up to him, wondering how he might capture such a healthy animal. But the lion saw him and frightened him away. The donkey turned on him as the man ran into the distance. "Idiot! Haven't you anything better to do than frighten off my friends when they come to talk with me? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Even men eat out of his hand," thought the lion, remembering the admiration in the man's eyes as he gazed at the well-fed donkey. And the donkey said disgustedly, "That's the third and last time. I've no more patience and it's high time you were punished." Then, realizing what he had just said, he began to wonder how on earth he could carry out his threat since the lion was really much stronger than him.

But the lion was even more worried, thinking the same thing would happen to him as happened to the tortoise, so he bounded away thru the jungle. The donkey began to chase him, then

changed his mind and merely shouted, "Run as far as you like, silly beast, but you can be sure that one of my subjects will bring you back."

Frightened, and out of breath, the lion eventually met a fox who asked him what was wrong.

"Don't ask me any more," sighed the unhappy lion. "At any moment the beast will tear the heart and liver out of my body."

"Are you talking about a man? If so, there's nothing to worry about. He's at least as afraid of you as you are of him."

"If it only were a man," exclaimed the lion, shaking his mane. "No, this beast is much greater than a man. You wouldn't believe what a voice or body or what strength he has."

"I've never heard of such a creature before. Can you describe him? "

Just thinking about the donkey made the lion tremble, but he tried. "He is much bigger than me, and has a frightening voice. His great eyes see everything, his large ears hear everything. His huge mouth is set with rows of enormous teeth and his paws are round and hard like clubs. Why, he can kick any object at least twenty yards with his hind legs. I tell you, it's impossible for me to remain in the same jungle with an animal like that."

"Oh greatest among beasts," soothed the fox, "I know your word is law, and yet this story is unbelievable. I think the creature you describe is only a donkey, your natural meal. He couldn't hurt you, far less tear out your heart and liver. No doubt his bark is worse than his bite, as they say. Now you don't take notice of every loud noise. You know that the thickest tree is cut by the smallest knife, the largest animal blinded by the smallest hawk."

"That's all very well," said the lion uncertainly, "but a violent wind can uproot strong trees and houses without harming the smallest blade of grass."

"It's as you say, Sir, but don't be like the fox who was deceived by the size of a drum."

"How was that? " asked the lion.

Then the fox began. "A drum that was tied to a tree was making loud noises, produced by a branch that beat against it in

the breeze. A fox, who was about to pounce on a chicken from behind this tree, heard the noise and looked up. All he saw was a fat round object which looked as if it might have even more flesh to eat than a chicken, so he climbed up and began tearing at it, only to find that it was made of wood and tightly-stretched skin. Meanwhile the chicken had run away and the fox had nothing. Then he realized he had been deceived by nothing better than a bag of wind. And you, Sir, should know better than that."

The lion cautiously decided to put the matter to the test and set out with the fox to find out. The donkey, on the other hand, was rolling in the dust to celebrate the end of all his fears. "He's gone," he chuckled, "I can't believe it, I must be dreaming."

Suddenly he realized that he might as well have been dreaming, for there in the distance was the lion, coming along the road with a fox. "That's done it, I can't get away now," muttered the donkey. And then a crafty thought crossed his mind and he shouted out loud enough for the whole jungle to hear, "Well done, Fox, my faithful servant! You've brought back the runaway beast. Just wait and see what I do with him."

The lion was certain that the fox had tricked him and rushed off in one direction, knocking over his friend, while the donkey galloped off in the other. But the fox just laughed to see how frightened they were of each other. For a long while both pounded up and down, afraid to stop, until they suddenly found themselves face to face on a path.

"If I have to die," thought the lion, advancing with quaking knees, "I might as well put up a fight and die honorably." But to his amazement he saw the donkey backing away from him. He was so happy he went pink with joy, which made the poor donkey go green with terror. In a few moments it was all over, and the lion was king of the beasts once more.

"Ha-ha," said the lion, licking his whiskers, "you can't tell a book by its cover, and in the dark all cats look grey. If only I had realized how right the fox was I might have made a meal of that fat donkey long ago! "

# the squirrel that wanted its tail stitched back on

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a short, plump, rosy, smiling twelve-year-old girl called Goli (which means Tiny Rose) who lived with her mother in a lovely little house. Like all Persian houses, it was surrounded by white walls, and in the center there was a small, stone-brimmed pool of bubbling water with a beautiful little bed of flowers at each corner.

One summer afternoon, about tea-time, Goli was sweeping the paved paths around the pool with a broom of hollow bamboo-shoots. When she had finished she stood the broom against a walnut tree, and under its shade she spread a carpet, and on the carpet she spread a clean white cloth, and on the cloth she laid a samovar of boiling water, a pot full of tea, two cups and spoons, and a bowl of sugar. No sooner had she sat down to wait for her mother than out of a hole in the tree crept a baby red squirrel with a long, bushy tail that waved high in the air, like a flag.

This squirrel darted to the pool and had just put its little nose down for a drink when its eyes lighted on the smiling Goli. Since all squirrels are shy creatures it turned to run, but found the broom standing in the way. This made Goli laugh, and the squirrel was even more frightened. It ran backwards and forwards, not really knowing where to hide, and somehow its tail got caught in the broom. More frightened than ever, it twisted and it squirmed until it pulled its tail right off.

Now what good was a red squirrel without a tail? How could he balance himself for a flying leap? All the other young squirrels would laugh at him now. So he just stared at his tail and his eyes got bigger and bigger.

Goli reached over and pulled the tail loose and laid it at the squirrel's feet. "Poor thing," she said, "why didn't you look where you were going? "

"Telling me that now only adds salt to the wound," cried the squirrel. "Of course, I saw the broom, but it would seem that the Unseen Hands of the Stars drove me into the wretched old thing."

"What have Unseen Hands got to do with it? " asked Goli, amazed.

"My father told me that people have good and bad stars and they make you do things without really meaning to. That's what once happened to an unlucky nightingale."

"How did it happen? " Goli wanted to know.

"Once a nightingale picked up a rose from a bush, under which a cunning gardener had placed a trap, and he soon found himself in a cage. So he asked the gardener, "Why put me in a cage? If you wanted to listen to me sing, you could have heard me just as well from my nest in your garden." And the gardener said, "You're getting what you deserve for ill-treating my roses." "If I'm being punished just for ill-treating a rose, what do you deserve for imprisoning a living bird who sings so sweetly? " he answered. The gardener was so ashamed he set the bird loose and in return the nightingale offered him a gift of gold, which was hidden underneath the rose-bush, as a reward. "But how could you know there was gold hidden under it when you couldn't even see the trap I caught you in? " asked the gardener in amazement. "Oh, I saw the trap," the bird replied, "but the Unseen Hands pushed me into it. I couldn't help myself."

Here the squirrel paused. Goli indignantly put her hands on her hips and exclaimed, "Listen, you nitwit! Bad star or no bad star, you've got to have your tail stitched back on. Take it to the cobbler and he'll look after it for you. And in the meantime ignore this Star of yours. If you want your tail back where



it belongs, it's up to you to see that it gets done. So don't blame things on Unseen Hands."

Red Squirrel picked up his tail between his teeth and carried it to the cobbler.

*"Oh Cobbler, Mr. Cobbler,  
Stitch my tail back on."*

"God bless you," said the cobbler. "You'll have to bring me some thread first." So Red Squirrel ran quickly to the spinner's shop.

*"Oh Spinner, Mr. Spinner,  
Give me some thread for the cobbler  
To stitch my tail back on."*

"God bless you," said the spinner, "but I've got to have some cotton first." At once Red Squirrel went looking for the farmer.

*"Oh Farmer, Mr. Farmer,  
Give me some cotton for the spinner,  
To get thread for the cobbler  
To stitch my tail back on."*

"Heaven help you," said the farmer, "but first I'll need a sieve to separate the cotton from the leaves." Then Red Squirrel ran over hill and dale to a gypsy

*"Oh Gypsy, Mrs. Gypsy,  
Give me a sieve for the farmer  
To get cotton for the spinner  
To get thread for the cobbler  
To stitch my tail back on."*

The gypsy laughed and showed her fine white teeth. "Heaven help you," she said, "but I must have some goat's hair first to make a sieve." Red Squirrel limped slowly on and finally saw a goat drinking at a brook.

*"Oh She-goat, kind Mrs. Goat,  
Give me some hair for the gypsy  
To make a sieve for the farmer  
To get cotton for the spinner  
To get thread for the cobbler  
To stitch my tail back on."*



"Baa-baa-aa-a" bleated the bearded goat. "I'll need an armful of grass first." Red Squirrel crept even more slowly towards the field, for he was very tired by now.

*"Oh Green Field, Mr. Green Field,  
Give me some grass for the goat  
So she'll give hair for the gypsy  
To make a sieve for the farmer  
To get cotton for the spinner  
To get thread for the cobbler  
To stitch my tail back on."*

"I've got to have some water first," murmured the field. Worn-out and foot-sore, Red Squirrel dragged himself to the canal.

*"Oh Canal, Mr Canal,  
Give me some water for the field  
To get grass for the she-goat  
So she'll give hair for the gypsy  
To make a sieve for the farmer  
To get cotton for the spinner  
To get thread for the cobbler  
To stitch my tail back on."*

"Burbble-gurgle" chuckled the canal. "I'm sorry, little one, but this water isn't mine. You'll have to get permission from the Meer-aab. He's the one who looks after the water and distributes it for irrigating the fields." Red Squirrel staggered on, almost ready to collapse, but he wouldn't give up. At last he found the Meer-aab.

*"Oh Meer-aab, Mr. Meer-aab,  
Allow the canal  
To give water to the field  
To get grass for the she-goat  
So she'll give hair for the gypsy  
To make a sieve for the farmer  
To get cotton for the spinner  
To get thread for the cobbler  
To stitch my tail back on."*

Leaning on his spade and looking kindly at the weary but determined face of the squirrel, the canal-keeper nodded his admiration for the little animal.

"God help you, poor, tired, dusty Red Squirrel. A tail must be as important to you as my hands are to me. Take as much water as you need."

"Oh, thank-you very much, Sir; may you live to be a hundred-and-twenty! "

The squirrel was so happy he forgot all the weary miles he'd had to walk and went darting and leaping to the canal.

"Oh Canal, Mr. Canal, Meer-Aab says I can have some of your water."

So the canal gave water, the field gave him grass and the goat let him have some hair; the gypsy made a sieve and the farmer gave him cotton for the spinner, who spun him some thread to give to the cobbler, and the cobbler finally stitched the beautiful, long, red tail back onto the squirrel.

"Thank you ever so much, Mr. Cobbler," said Red Squirrel as he danced down the street. Now no other little squirrel would dare laugh at him and he'd be able to balance for a flying-leap any time he wanted to. Singing all the way he went to show Goli and thank her for her advice.

"From now on I'll know better than to be afraid," he smiled.

"And don't forget you're more powerful than any Star or Unseen Hands," said Goli. "Remember what a poet once wrote:

*Even if what you want  
Is in a lion's mouth,  
Go in and get it out."*

# the greatest

ONE HOT SUMMER DAY long ago a man was riding his grey donkey across a treeless plain. Now this was a very special man. And because he was the most virtuous and kind-hearted in the land he was called *The Devout*. But even a special man like this can become tired and thirsty, and The Devout was very happy indeed when he came at last to a small pool of brown water shaded by a clump of sweet chestnut trees.

Leaving his donkey to graze, he washed in the cool water, drank a little, and then lay down in the shade. Scarcely a moment had passed before a crow, flying high above, let a small creature that had been fighting for its life drop from its beak. The Devout immediately sprang to his feet and ran across the burning sand to save it. And then he discovered it was a beautiful baby lizard, which the good man's religion forbade him to touch because it was an unclean creature. But he felt he could not leave this weak creature to die in the heat and so, wrapping it in a few wet leaves, he took it home with him.

"Oh, my Reverend Devout," cried his wife, "why are you bringing this unclean creature into our house? "

"Because it is also a helpless creature," replied her husband.

"Well," she said, trusting in her husband's great and special powers, "let's hope that your prayers will give it a human form."

So The Devout bathed himself, specially washing his head,

face and arms three times and, after dressing in fresh white robes went into his special prayer room. Well, in no time at all the tiny lizard turned into a lovely little girl with golden-red hair and a complexion as clear as the freshest egg. The Devout and his wife were as thrilled as a beggar finding a bag of gold. It just shows that if you really want something miracles can happen.

The child made the couple very happy. They kissed her with all the love that real parents can give, and they called her Zeeba, which means Beautiful. As the years passed she grew more and more lovely, and people said her face was as pretty as a pomegranate flower and her form as slender as a willow.

One day The Devout asked her if she wanted to marry.

"I only want to marry the one whose power can defeat the whole world," she answered. "Well! She doesn't want much does she!" The Devout exclaimed to himself. Then he said to her, "I'd like to tell you a story first. It shows how useless it is to want the impossible. If you're too greedy you may lose the little that you do have. The same thing may happen to you as happened to the poor but ambitious cat."

"What did happen to her?" asked the curious Zeeba.

"Well," began The Devout, settling himself into a comfortable position and folding his hands, "there was once an old woman who lived in a hut as dark as ignorance and smaller than a miser's tomb. With her there lived a cat so thin that she looked like a shadow at a distance. This cat had so little to eat that even the print of a mouse's paw on the floor was enough to make her happy. And if she was ever fortunate enough to catch a whole mouse she would make the feast last a whole week, hardly daring to believe it was true, and continually pinching herself to see if she were really awake.

There came a day when she was so weak from hunger that she could barely crawl up into the roof to sun herself. But what should she see stalking along the wall opposite with the fierce tread of a tiger than a cat so very fat that it could barely raise its paws to walk. The poor cat was so surprised she could hardly believe her eyes at first. And at last she plucked up courage and strength enough to talk to this amazing animal.

"Where have you come from, O stately strider? And where is your Ladyship's home, you are so lovely to behold? How have you come by so much strength and girth, as if you had but lately left off feasting with the Emperor of China."

The other turned with a scornful look at the poor woman's cat and answered: "I am the sultan's crumb-eater. Every morning I grace his table to delight him, and as a reward am fed upon the choicest meats. Then I go out and pass the day as lazily as I can."

"Alas," said the poor cat, "what sort of thing is meat? Up until now I have never even heard of it, far less eaten it."

"That is why I had difficulty in telling whether you were a cat or a spider at first," laughed the royal cat. You must come and visit the palace with me. Why, just the smell of the foods there would put flesh on your bones. The way you look now is a disgrace to the name of cat."

The poor cat was too overjoyed to do more than stammer her thanks and promise to visit her new friend on the next day. Then she ran off to her mistress to tell her all about this unexpected good fortune. But the old woman only frowned and bent her head when she heard of it.

"What is this foolishness?" she asked. "I have loved you as parents love their children, for I know that love is just as important to animals as it is to human beings. You were happy before, with my love and the safety of our little hut. Why risk all this for a dangerous place like a palace? It is happiness and contentment that makes us truly rich, and not the pride of possessions and great but untrustworthy friends."

But the half-starved cat would not listen to reason and could only think of the delightful eating in store for her; she could not get a wink of sleep all night and next day hobbled to the palace as soon as it was light. Unhappily for her, she did not know that the night before the sultan had held a great feast, and so many cats had surrounded the palace, attracted by the rich smells, that their yowlings and howlings had disturbed the sultan and his guests. He had, therefore, ordered his archers to guard the gates and shoot at any cat that came in sight, to teach all cats a lesson. No sooner did the poor woman's cat come

than she was shot so full of arrows that she looked like an enormous hedgehog.

"Ah," she breathed, as she died, "I did not realize that those who go seeking honey are often stung. How content I should be now with even one mouse. Even the poorest meal is happiness compared to this."

When the Devout had finished, Zeeba said, "I know you're very wise, Daddy, but just because things seem difficult it doesn't mean that you should not try first. And I still want to marry the greatest in the world."

"Well, you may be right," said The Devout. "I'll see what I can do."

So he thought and thought for days, until he decided the sun must be The Greatest. No power could possibly conquer the sun, he thought. And he went to where the sun was peeping behind a mountain and said, "Oh greatest of all things, candle of Earth and Heaven, my daughter Zeeba is as fresh as the morning breeze in a rose-garden and she wants to marry The Greatest, which must be you."

"Ah, you're mistaken," said the sun. "The clouds defeat me by hiding my rays from the earth beneath their veils."

So The Devout climbed up to the clouds lying on top of the mountain: "Greatest of all, I wish to tell you that my Zeeba, lovelier than a fairy, wants to marry you."

"I'm not The Greatest," said the cloud sadly. "The wind can send me wherever it wants, simply by blowing."

On hearing this The Devout hurried off to where the wind was jumping up and down over the trembling trees, but the wind laughed and said, "He-he, that's not right. Look at that mountain over there; I can't make that move however much I blow."

Then The Devout hurried back to the mountain and asked him if he was The Greatest. "I only wish I were," said the mountain. "But actually it's the grass. It grows all over me whether I want it to or not."

The Devout was amazed that the great and lofty mountain, sitting there so solemnly, had so little power. But when he asked the grass it told him that the goat was even more power-



ful because he came and ate it whenever he wanted to. So he went to the goat, who was leaping about from rock to rock on the slopes. "Oh no," he said. "The butcher soon makes short work of me and sells my meat."

Feeling desperate by now, The Devout went up to the butcher behind his counter, but it was the same thing all over again. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but the Shah gets nearly all I earn in taxes and I can't do anything about it."

"The Greatest must be somewhere," The Devout thought as he hurried off to the palace. The Shah was sitting there, looking very royal on a shining golden throne, when The Devout bowed and explained what he wanted.

"My good man," answered the Shah. "I may seem powerful, but it's the lizard that's the greatest of all. Without asking my permission he makes a tiny hole deep in the dust under the foundation stones of my palace and lives there with his family. And even if I do manage to kill him it's no use because his son and daughter only come and take his place."

The Devout quickly dug out a lizard dressed in light orange velvet who happened to be telling a passing mouse what dull colors the palace was painted in. When he had heard about Zeeba's wish he said, "I should be most honored, but how can a reptile marry a human? Let's not take this idea of The Greatest too far! "

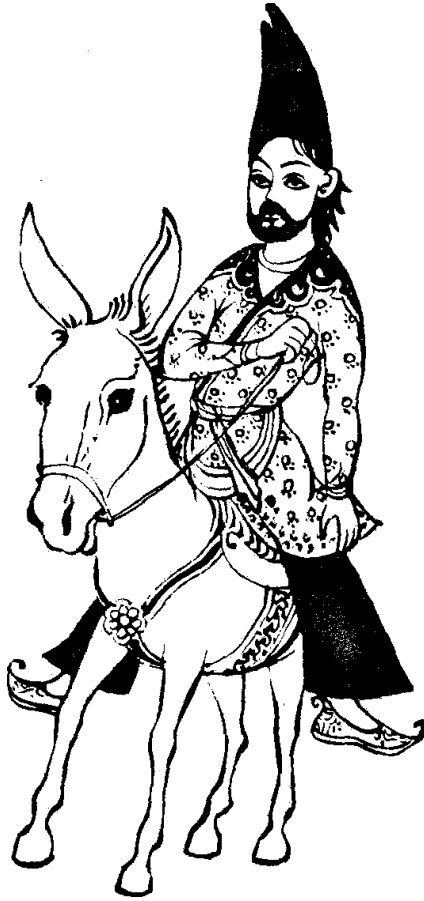
The search seemed hopeless to The Devout, for now that he had found The Greatest, Zeeba couldn't marry him. So he went sadly home and sat on the carpet.

But when he told Zeeba he was surprised to see she seemed very happy about something. "Why can't your prayer change me back to a lizard? " she asked.

"Oh course! " said The Devout, springing to his feet. Again he bathed three times, dressed in clean white robes and went into his prayer-room. Soon the beautiful Zeeba had changed back into a lizard with a long tapering tail and bright eager eyes. Quickly she scurried out to meet The Greatest. The happy lizards came back to thank The Devout for all his help and then disappeared into the distance.

“How silly of me to think The Greatest couldn’t be found,” said The Devout.

“Ah yes,” said his wife. “But since Zeeba has won his heart she must be greater still! ”



# little miss frog

THERE WAS ONCE a large lake in Persia around which many small creatures had built their homes. The golden sun shining from the clear blue sky warmed its waters and all along its banks there grew large shady trees, while by the shore flowers and small bushes were growing. Some of the creatures had nests in the trees and bushes, while others lived in the flowers and under grasses; still others lived in the crystal waters of the lake itself.

All day the birds were singing round this lake, and only went back to their nests to sleep at night. Darkness was the time for the beetles who organized choirs and sang until day. When the sun rose butterflies scurried from their homes under the rose petals and flew from flower to flower.

Now in the lake there was a certain Little Miss Frog living with her father. Ever since her mother had died she had cooked and sewed and looked after this father. She was gentle, kind and pretty, but unfortunately her father was just the opposite. He liked no one, so naturally no one liked him. This skimpy-brained creature with fat legs and a rolling belly would just sit all day watching the world go by with dull and gloomy eyes and a nasty expression on his face. He was even too lazy to join in the singing. When he wasn't stuffing himself with food he passed his time lying on a soft grassy mattress fringed with yellow and green silk curtains made of twining shrubs and herbs. Once

in a while he would deign to lumber out into the lake, swimming slowly in circles like an enormous battleship, while everyone gasped in disbelief.

Because he was a very rich frog he thought that he was much grander than all the other frogs in the world and was very upset when his daughter wanted to go out and play with the other pitiful creatures. There had always been other boy and girl frogs living in the lake, but never before had there been anyone like Little Miss Frog. She used to beg her father for permission to go out and play with the others, but he would say that she was superior to them and there was no one noble enough for her there. Since she was a good daughter, and tried to please her father by being obedient, she stayed in. If he said no, then that was enough.

Little Miss Frog wasn't lazy. She sang all day as she made the beds and kept the house clean and cooked fresh food for her father. But bit by bit, as day after day and week after week went by without a change in her life, she began to wonder what would become of her. Sometimes she felt lonely without any friends and used to cry quietly.

"Be patient," her nurse used to say. "All things come to an end sometime. One day things will be better, so don't give up hope."

One day a turtle who had been Father Frog's playmate when they were both young came to visit him. But her father was angry and shouted, "Throw this crude creature out of my noble presence!" The turtle's warm, friendly smile vanished as he turned away sadly. Little Miss Frog was so ashamed and unhappy that tears fell from her eyes and splashed into the lake.

Not long after she was sunbathing on the bank. The sun was so hot and bright that it made her blink. Suddenly a slithering snake appeared from nowhere and frightened Little Miss Frog so much that she couldn't move. Nearer and nearer twisted the snake with glaring yellow eyes, while Little Miss Frog felt more and more numb. She could only scream very faintly and leave herself to the mercy of her enemy.

Just then there was a movement in the bushes and out stepped a strong young turtle. In a flash he had snapped his strong

jaws round the snake's neck and held him writhing until he was dead. Little Miss Frog nearly fainted. Then the turtle came forward and bowed to her politely, like a cavalier, and she dropped him a curtsy in reply.

"O lion-hearted one, I thank you," she said.

Then she sighed and wondered how she could repay him for his brave deed.

"I couldn't visit him," she thought, "my father would never allow it." But then she sat down beside him and talked about the lake, the weather, the water and how nice it was for swimming in. But she didn't dare tell him where she lived because of her father, so she never found out where he lived either. In the end she said good-bye and hopped back home.

That night she couldn't sleep for thinking of the turtle with the back as strong as the Rock of Gibraltar and wondering how she could find him again. Every day after that she looked all round the lake in the hope of seeing him, but he never appeared.

Father Frog kept on growing fatter until the day came when he was too slow and heavy to escape from another much larger snake that found its way into his house. There he sat, like the Fat Lady in a circus, surrounded by a dozen or more of his servants. Some had brought delicious foods made out of butterflies and tiny fishes, while others carried in fresh cool drinks. When they saw the snake's head coming through the door they all dropped their trays and darted into the lake for safety. Father Frog looked all round him, puffing and shouting for help, but it was no use. Nearer and nearer drew the snake, his yellow eyes blazing, and then, before he could croak once more, it gulped him down like a piece of cake. And that was the end of the pompous old thing. Off went the snake with a satisfied smirk, and all was quiet once more.

Now Little Miss Frog was free to swim in the lake whenever she wanted, and everyone noticed how pretty she was and what good manners she had. Many young frogs wanted to marry her, but the only person she thought of was her own brave turtle whom she had lost.

One day, as was the custom at that time, the mother and

sister of a fine young lobster came to propose on his behalf.

"O beautiful one," they said, "we have come from far away to offer you the love of our son and brother, the Lobster."

"I'm sorry," answered Little Miss Frog, "but lobsters are always busy with their prayers, and are grave and silent, while I like to sing all the time. They walk sideways slowly, while it is my nature to hop. Most important of all, my husband must be as strong as the Rock of Gibraltar."

Next came the family of shining fish.

"O most attractive of all frogs," they said, "will you do us the honor of wedding the fish who has sent us?"

"Oh no, I'm sorry, but I can't," replied Little Miss Frog. "It is true that fish are gentle and graceful and do no harm to others, but they dive deep down into the water and could never hop on the ground with me. They are soft, while my husband must be as strong as The Rock of Gibraltar."

After she had put off many eligible young men of the lake in this way, the others dared not ask her hand, and as for Little Miss Frog, she could never bury the memory of the young turtle who had saved her. As soon as the sun had risen each day she hopped into the grassy meadows looking for him, but at night she came back sadder and lonelier with her head bowed down to her knees, while her friends looked on, shaking their heads in sorrow.

And then one day, a young turtle who was passing by the lake heard the story of this independent-minded frog, and of her beauty and charm. "This is someone I should like to marry," he thought.

Soon after a dignified mother-turtle came up to Little Miss Frog's house.

"O most graceful one," she said, "would you become the wife of my son and make him the master of the earth and sky?"

"Could this be the mother of the noble one with the strong back?" she wondered hopefully. At any rate, there was only one way to find out; she must accept him, for it was the custom that the bride and groom never saw one another until the wedding. So she said yes.

Perfumed invitations were sent out to all the animals living in wood, water, and meadow. Little Miss Frog's friends decorated the house in which she was to live with sweet-smelling violets, pansies and carnations. Outside they hung huge festoons of lilac, honeysuckle, and jasmine. Mirrors of clear water were framed in hare-bells and petunias. Candles of red and white tulips, narcissus, and cuckoopint, were fastened here and there about the rooms.

Each guest put on his gayest clothes and went to cheer the bride and groom and escort them to their home carrying tulip-candles. Little Miss Frog, dressed in a green silk gown, a green and gold brocade cloak, and green velvet shoes and gloves embroidered with pearls and gold, mounted a bat and flew off in the company of her friends. Ahead of the procession hedgehogs were sweeping the carpets of moss. Crickets and bees sang joyfully as butterflies danced in the air and storks turned somersaults gamboling like gay clowns. Crows were reading prayers and burning an incense of wild herbs in small censers. Even swans raised their proud necks to see it.

The frogs rejoiced and the turtles tumbled this way and that. They were all going merrily along free from worry, except for Little Miss Frog, who was more anxious than ever. "Is he the one with the strong back?" she wondered over and over again as she neared her new home. Then the procession paused, for it was now the custom for the groom to come and greet his bride and walk at the side of her mount the rest of the way.

Little Miss Frog slowly lifted the corner of her veil, but instead of her groom she saw a hedgehog bowing before her. It was the cousin of her groom who had come to tell her that the new home was ready to be honored by her presence. Then a young turtle came up to her and said he was the groom's brother. At last the groom himself came out to greet his bride. Again she lifted a corner of her veil and could hardly believe her eyes. It was the one, it really was! It was the turtle with the back as strong as the Rock of Gibraltar.

The turtle bowed to her politely and then returned with her to the house, walking beside her bat. The guests followed and stayed feasting, dancing, and singing for seven days. Any food

they did not eat was given to the poor. Then they all left Little Miss Frog and the turtle to live happily ever after, as the sun poured down its radiance upon them by day, and the moon by night.



# little miss ladybird

ONCE UPON A TIME, long, long before this story begins, Miss Sooskeh wore a shining gold coat, like all young ladybirds. She had grace and beauty, but was a very quiet little thing, and lived with her father in the grass of a craggy hillside. Her mother had flown away while Miss Sooskeh was still a baby and never returned. But the father sadly stayed on and saw to it that his daughter was properly brought up.

One bright Spring morning, when little Miss Sooskeh had grown into a beautiful young lady, her father told her she ought to go out into the world and find a husband, so that when he had passed on, as all of us must, she would not be lonely. Miss Sooskeh obeyed, knowing that good parents always give wise advice. And so, after she had finished the housework, she began to prepare herself for her journey, for ladybirds take a pride in looking nice and neat.

Sitting before her mirror, which was a daffodil-cup filled with early morning dew, she performed the Seven Rites of Beauty. First she combed out her hair and sprinkled it with perfumed powder from the center of a jasmine-flower. Then she blackened her eyelashes with kohl (a sort of mascara) to protect them from the glare of the sun. Next she manicured her nails with a thorn and polished them with the petal from a white rose before tinting the tips of her tiny fingers with red henna. And to round everything off with an extra something she sprinkled a

little rose perfume on her curls, her ears, her throat, **and** wrists.

For this special day she chose a fine blouse of rose petals and a coat made from the outer skin of a white onion, because the Spring weather was still quite cool. Her red shoes were made from apple-skin, and the veil she threw over her head as a final touch was a finely embroidered cobweb.

"My, what a little beauty you look!" exclaimed her father as she set out, ready to conquer the world. Everyone looked up in admiration as she skipped along, looking neither to right nor left, for a lady's dignity does not allow her to pry into the affairs of others, and little Miss Sooskeh was every inch a lady. But one unexpected remark she heard while passing a grocery did make her turn round.

"Why, it's a beetle! How strange," said the smiling grocer.

"A *beetle*! Did I hear you call me a beetle?" inquired the indignant little lady. "Shame on you for calling someone lovelier than the rose and fresher than early dew a mere beetle!"

The grocer was embarrassed and could only stammer "My apologies, dear lady. I'm quite overcome and don't know what to say."

"You should say, Dear Cousin, Little Red-Shoed Silky-Veil, may God bless you, and where are you going?"

Well, the grocer fumbled his way through saying all this and Miss Sooskeh swiftly replied:

"I'm going to Hamadan  
To marry Ramazan,  
To help him as his wife,  
And live with him all his life,  
Collecting wheat,  
Preparing meat,  
Churning butter,  
Bringing water;  
And then I shan't be  
A burden to my father."

"Good luck to you", said the grocer. "And why not marry me?"

"Perhaps I might. But what if we should ever disagree? How would you treat me? "

"Well, I suppose I should spank you."

"Oh! What with? " asked Miss Sooskeh, looking very worried. "With this weighing stone on my scale", said the grocer, heaving it up into the air.

"Oh no, I could never marry you. You'd be the end of me!" So Miss Sooskeh went on her way, feeling grieved, until she came to a butcher's shop.

"Well! well! it's a beetle, as I live and breathe," cried the butcher, a huge fellow with a pot-belly, grinning down at her.

"Shame on you! How can you call one who is lovelier than the rose and fresher than early dew a *beetle*? You're certainly speaking out of turn, my good man."

"And what should I say that will please you, Little Miss? "

So once again Miss Sooskeh repeated all her titles and smiled as he said them over word for word. And then she told him about her journey.

"Good luck to you," said the butcher. "And why not marry me? "

"Perhaps I might. But what if we should ever disagree? How would you treat me? "

"Well, I suppose I should spank you."

"Ugh! What with? "

"With the blade of this knife", shouted the butcher, baring his teeth and whistling it through the air.

"Oh, what a terrible man you are! I could never marry you for that knife of yours would be the end of me." So off went Miss Sooskeh, very angry with the butcher, until she reached the feed store. There too the owner called her a beetle and was roundly told off and made to repeat all her titles, and then Miss Sooskeh told him of the object of her journey.

"You must stay and marry me," begged the owner of the feed store.

"And if we should disagree, what would you do? "

"Well, I suppose I should spank you with this long measuring-stick."

Well, Miss Sooskeh didn't like the idea of that at all. What a

shocking thing to do! So off she went, paying no more attention to him, and crawling on until she came to a little hill. Here Aqa Mooshak (Mr. Mouse) had his home. He was neatly dressed in a soft grey velvet coat, a gay red cap and yellow trousers.

"May God go with you, dear little cousin," he addressed her. "And may I ask where you are going this fine morning? "

Miss Sooskeh was still so shocked by the insulting behavior she had experienced before that she really had to gather her wits about her. But she turned with admiration on seeing it was the handsome Aqa Mooshak who had spoken to her.

"Salaam, peace be with you, O Velvet-Trousered, Noble Mouse of Honorable Parentage. I should tell you that I journey with my father's permission and

I'm going to Hamadan  
To marry Ramazan,  
To help him as his wife,  
And live with him all his life,  
Collecting wheat,  
Preparing meat,  
Churning butter,  
Bringing water;  
And then I shan't be  
A burden to my father."

"Oh. Well... I wonder if... erm, cough!... perhaps... that is to say, if you have no objection...ahem, AHM(cough! Cough!)... I wonder, would you, *would* you consider staying with me? " And the poor mouse was so embarrassed that he blushed deeply and twiddled all his fingers and didn't dare look her in the face but gazed up into the clouds and wound one of his legs three and a half times round the other.

"I should like that very much. But would you mind telling me what we should do for a bed? "

"How about making it over a goat-skin filled with grape-syrup? " suggested the happy mouse.

Miss Sooskeh shook her head and laughed. "Oh no. No one could sleep on a sticky bed like that."

"Very well, How about a goat-skin filled with butter? "

"No, no. Not a greasy bed!"

"What would you say to a goat-skin filled with sour cream? "

"Not at all. That would be too slimy."

"Would a sack of walnuts suit you?"

"No thank you, there are too many bulges and bumps."

"Alright, my angel. You could sleep on my lap. Would that please you? "

"What could I use as a pillow? "

"I'd cradle your lovely head in my arms."

"How marvellous! But what if we should ever disagree? "

"I'd spank you, my dear."

"Hmph! What with? "

"Why, with my soft, silky tail, of course."

Miss Sooskeh was delighted, but she asked, "I wonder if you still want to marry me, now that you know how fussy I am? "

"More than ever," Aqa Mooshak shouted.

"That's wonderful. Alright, let's announce the marriage."

Every mouse and beetle for miles around was invited to the wedding. The next day they all arrived to help clean out Aqa Mooshak's house, a large hole at the foot of the hill. The mice ran down the dusty slope gathering bundles of wild flowers, while the beetles cooked wedding foods and sweets, and Miss Sooskeh sat up half the night getting her dress ready. Then the wedding took place. As was the custom, the guests stayed for a week and sent the pair valuable gifts after they had returned home.

The days passed cheerfully as Mr. & Mrs. Mooshak worked hard at the happy task of gathering grain, sugar, and preserving everything in jars ready for winter. Sooskeh was always tidy and clean, and liked to wash everything around her whenever possible. So one day, while Mooshak had gone after food in the Shah's kitchen, she collected all the dirty clothes she could find in order to wash them in the brook. It was a dark winter's morning when she arrived and the rocks were slippery. Just as she was finishing, the noon sun peeped from behind the clouds and dazzled her, so that she slipped on the rock and tumbled headlong into the rushing stream.

The water tossed Sooskeh from side to side, but at last she

managed to hold onto a blade of grass which was growing at the brook's edge and drag herself to safety. "Oh dear," she cried, streaming wet and shivering with cold, "who will ever find me here? And who will bring news of what has happened to my Aqa Mooshak? "

As she was wondering what to do, a large black ant came riding by the brook, so Sooskeh shouted up to him. "Oh horseman, brave cavalier, I beg you to go to the Shah's kitchen and tell my wooly-coated Mooshak that his Sooskeh, the light of his house, is clinging to a blade of grass by the water's edge. And please tell him particularly to bring a ladder of gold and save me as quickly as he can. Now don't forget."

With tremendous spurts of his long legs the ant galloped to the kitchen and shouted "Aqa Mooshak, Aqa Mooshak, listen to me."

"Be quiet! " squeaked the mouse in alarm, "do you want to bring all the cats in the palace down on my head and force me to run away, leaving behind all these fine foods? "

"Forget all your fine foods, you stupid mouse," said the irritated ant. "I have just left your Sooskeh clinging to a blade of grass at the water's edge, and all you think about is collecting food. Go and save her at once, and don't forget to take a golden ladder to do it with. She asked me particularly to remember that."

Aqa Mooshak was so flustered that he dropped all his food right there and scampered off to the brook. "Oh my," he exclaimed when he saw Sooskeh, "what happened to you? " And first he tried pulling her by the hand, but soon realized he would only pull her arm off. Then he tried taking hold of her legs, but this too was no use, for the same thing would happen. Next he pulled her hair, but that was no good either; he didn't pull her up, he just pulled her hair out. "What can I do? " he wailed.

"Where is the golden ladder? " Sooskeh asked him. "Didn't you get my message? "

"Yes, but I was so worried that I forgot."

"Well, you ought to have brought it. I have been here a long time, and my strength is giving way. I can't hold on much longer."

Aqa Mooshak was off like lightning to the grocer's store, where he picked up a big golden carrot in his sharp little teeth before racing back. Then he gnawed a hundred tiny steps round and round it and pushed this home-made staircase down to Sooskeh, giving her a helping hand as she wearily climbed to the top. No sooner was she safe on the bank again than he picked her up and carried her home to dry and warm her and put her to bed.

Back he went to the store for some rice, dried peas, scraps of meat, a turnip and an onion, and a bunch of fresh dill, to make a hot nourishing soup. He didn't want his little wife to catch a cold now she was safe. Sooskeh smiled at her hero and fell asleep while her husband hustled about the kitchen, lighting a roaring fire and stirring up the soup in a huge pot. But he was still so upset that he didn't look what he was doing half the time and suddenly lost his footing and fell into the bubbling mixture in the pot without being able to save himself.

Sooskeh woke up and became anxious. There was no sound from her husband for such a long time. So she quietly peeped into the kitchen. There was the soup, bubbling away on the fire, but no sign of Mooshak, not a sound, not a movement. Now where could he be? And then she noticed his long limp tail hanging over the edge of the pot. He had been trying to help her and died in the process. She stood still in horror, and then cried out in sorrow, tearing her hair and beating her breast. "Oh, my loyal Mooshak," she wept, "if only I could die in your place and bring back the sparkle into your dimmed black eyes. If only I might ransom your soft and tender tail! "

Friends and neighbours gathered to console her at the sound of her heartbroken sobbing. Tearfully she asked one to bring her the petals of a purple tulip, from which she made a long dark veil which covered her tiny body from head to foot. Loyal to her beloved Aqa Mooshak, she never took it off. And so great was her love and grief that from that day to this all ladybirds in Persia have dark purple wings, although, as it was with Sooskeh, there is gold shining under the darkness.

# the cat-king and the mice

IN the ancient Persian city of Kerman, which is renowned for the surpassing splendor of its cats, there once lived a cat who was known as the Cat-King. He was a hard-headed cat with the strength of ten who lived on the walls of the city. His chest was as broad as a shield and his belly the size of a drum. Between jaws set with sharp teeth wagged the pink and pointed length of his tongue. His waistcoat was of white ermine, and over it he wore a coat of shining black fur.

On fine days the Cat-King used to walk the walls with long legs proudly stiffened, his back arched, and his silvery tail waving like a banner. On cold, rainy days, naturally, he slept indoors; while in very hot weather he would pad down into the cool darkness of the wine-cellars to sleep among the barrels and vats. And whenever he felt like a bit of real exercise he would fight the other cats, just to remind them that he was the Cat-King. Often, while he was stealthily exploring on bright starlit nights, he would catch and eat mice, and many other things to which he had no right at all.

One sultry summer day when the Cat-King was lying behind one of the vats in a cellar, a young mouse crept out of his hole and jumped on top. Though he looked all around first he did not see the cat crouching in the shadows below. Then he began to dance — tap... tap... tap! Warming up to this occupation he felt



like singing a song about what a brave mouse he was; and especially about how he was not at all afraid of the Cat-King:

O where's that old black cat?  
I'm not afraid of him,  
He'd be too scared to fight me.  
I'd cut off his ugly head  
And stuff his skin with straw!

The Cat-King just sat there quietly and listened to his boasting. Louder and louder sang the mouse, faster and faster he danced, until he suddenly tripped over his tail and fell head-over-heels into the waiting claws below. When he looked up and saw those blazing yellow eyes, the little mouse sang a very different song.

"O king of all the animals, forgive me! I'm only a poor little creature, the very humblest of your slaves."

"Idiot!" roared the Cat-King, "I heard every word you said."

"But when I said that I was terribly drunk," the mouse pleaded.

"I'm in no mood to discuss it," snarled the king, and without further ado he swallowed the squeaking creature. Wiping his whiskers and stretching, he strolled elegantly out of the cellar and into the sun.

Happening to pass a nearby mosque, the Cat-King entered, sat near the wooden pulpit, and began washing his paws. Now that he had eaten the delicious young mouse and no longer felt hungry he was just a little sorry for what he had done. "I certainly need not have killed him," the Cat-King purred to himself. "From now on I'm not going to hurt any more mice. For what I've done in hasty anger today I shall give sixteen pounds of bread to the poor. And... oh yes! ... perhaps a tear for the little mouse."

Now there was another mouse curled up behind the pulpit, and when he overheard these noble words he fell from his hiding place in astonishment. Jumping up, he ran off to tell the other mice this wonderful news. They were all working busily when he found them. Some were creeping out of cellars and

kitchens with crumbs and titbits, and some were rushing in and out of their holes just for fun.

"Hoorah!" he squealed, "the merciless Cat-King is at last feeling sorry for the harm he has done us and has just vowed to kill no more mice."

"It's a miracle!" squeaked all the other mice, beside themselves with joy, for though it seemed incredible they wanted to believe it.

"I really think he likes us after all," said one mouse.

"What a dear, good old cat he is," said another.

And when they had got over their excitement they all sat down to discuss how they could show the Cat-King how grateful they were. Then one old grey mouse suggested they present him with the best meal they possibly could.

"Yes! Yes! " they all agreed. "If we feed him like that from time to time he may find it easier to keep his promise."

Scurrying happily in and out of the city's kitchens and pantries the mice gathered rare and elaborate foods and drinks. Seven of the most respected mice were chosen to carry the food to the cat. One balanced on his head a tray laden with bits of roasted lamb, stuffed with dried fruits, pistachio nuts, and almonds. Another carried a dish of cooked partridge with fried rice. Two carried trays of sugared raisins and dates, and two more had jars of Persian punch made of fruit juices. The last carried a pot of snowy yoghurt and a basket of bread, butter, and cheese.

When they found the Cat-King he was lying comfortably on a wall of the city, half asleep in the sun, and was very surprised indeed to see all these mice carrying such food. The mice paused cautiously at a distance and one of them cleared his throat to speak:

"O great king of all the cats, we would be honored if you would accept this humble gift that we have brought you."

"Ah," thought the smiling cat, "My daily food is sent from heaven itself". Then he stretched and said to the mice, "You are welcome, my friends, but come closer so that I may see your kind gifts."

The mice moved closer, trembling a bit but reassuring

themselves that the Cat-King was now their friend. They laid down their offerings and waited while he sniffed and looked the food over. "Now he's certain to be glad that we're friends," thought the mice, and their mouths watered at the very thought of the fine meal they had brought him.

"Very, very nice," purred the Cat-King, looking at them over the trays of food with gleaming eyes. Now his behavior seemed just a little suspicious, so after a while one mouse plucked up courage to ask if he was pleased with the food.

"I see no fresh meat here," said the Cat-King, suddenly leaping over the trays and seizing two mice in each of his claws and another in his teeth. The two mice who were left rushed over the walls and didn't stop until they reached the place where all the other mice had gathered to hear how the cat had received their offerings. When they heard what had happened their happiness turned to sorrow.

"And we believed he had been converted from his evil ways," they said sadly.

"Something must be done," said one of the mice. "We are in greater danger than ever. Once the Cat-King was content with one mouse at a time, but now he gobbles up five. Let's go to the Mouse-King. He's old and wise."

Before their journey they mourned for three days, wearing black clothes and pouring dust over their heads as they chanted songs for the dead. Then they set off on the long, difficult journey to the capital. Over the fields, moors, and hills, they crept on tiny feet, until they reached the last hill, at the foot of which the Mouse-King lived. He was having his breakfast in a field near some blossoming sweet-peas when the news reached him. Immediately he went back to his palace and mounted the throne, the tip of a rock which jutted through the end of his hole.

The Mouse-King had shining dewdrop eyes, pink ears, pointed chin, seed-like teeth and grey whiskers. He sat there looking very dignified in a heavy grey-plush robe, his pointed paws resting on the arms of the throne, his long tail curled across his knees. The chiefs among the visiting mice bowed and waited for him to order them to speak. Then they said: "O king of kings, listen to how miserable we are. As long as the Cat-King was our

enemy he was content to catch one of us at a time. But now he is pretending to be our well-behaved friend and has killed five of us at once."

"I've got an idea," said the Mouse-King after pondering for some time. "What would you think of having a war with the cats?"

"We believe that letting tyrants live is the same as killing the good," one mouse spoke up angrily. "We should punish him in a way that will be a lesson to all ages."

"My fellow mice," called out an old mouse, "haste is the Devil's ally. Wise people never do anything they will be sorry for afterwards. You should take time to think about things. It's the best way."

"We must have a war with the cats for the sake of justice," shouted a pious rich mouse. But another wise mouse said "I don't believe war is the answer. We ourselves are harmless, peaceful and loving and we ought to be against war. War is the path of death and misery in this world, and we'll only be digging our own graves. If we want to live peacefully we must learn to live with our enemies."

"But we must make the cat see the error of his ways," said a teacher-mouse. "Let's send the Cat-King an ultimatum that he must either come to our king and promise to stop destroying mice or prepare for war."

"That sounds a good plan," said the Mouse-King. "But who are we going to send with the message?"

All the mice looked at each other with blank faces. The king consulted his viziers and they all worried and thought until an old mouse volunteered to do it. The Cat-King was amazed when the messenger appeared before him, and the mouse himself was trembling all over at the thought of what had happened to his five friends. But he stopped near the walls, out of reach of the cat's claws, and called out, "Listen, Cat-King. The Mouse-King wants you to come to his court and renew your promise to kill no more mice. And if you don't you must prepare for war."

"What's that?" said the Cat-King, who had completely forgotten his promise. "You and that silly king of yours. Do you

think for a moment that cats are afraid of you? Go and tell your king to prepare for war himself."

The messenger-mouse, who had been sure that his last hour had come, dodged down the wall like a bolt of lightning, his hair standing on end and his grey hat quaking on the top of his tiny head.

Meanwhile the Cat-King, who would not have minded a small snack about then, was just a little disappointed that the messenger had got away so nimbly. But he rolled over and, closing his eyes, consoled himself with the thought that it was probably tough and stringy anyway.

By this time the old mouse had got back to the palace. There he greeted his king and sighed, "I'm afraid the Cat-King is very set in his ways, and being friends with the mice isn't one of them. He'll never change."

"On this day of days, O lions, you must fight! " shouted the Mouse-King. "Be brave. Kill and be killed. March against tyranny."

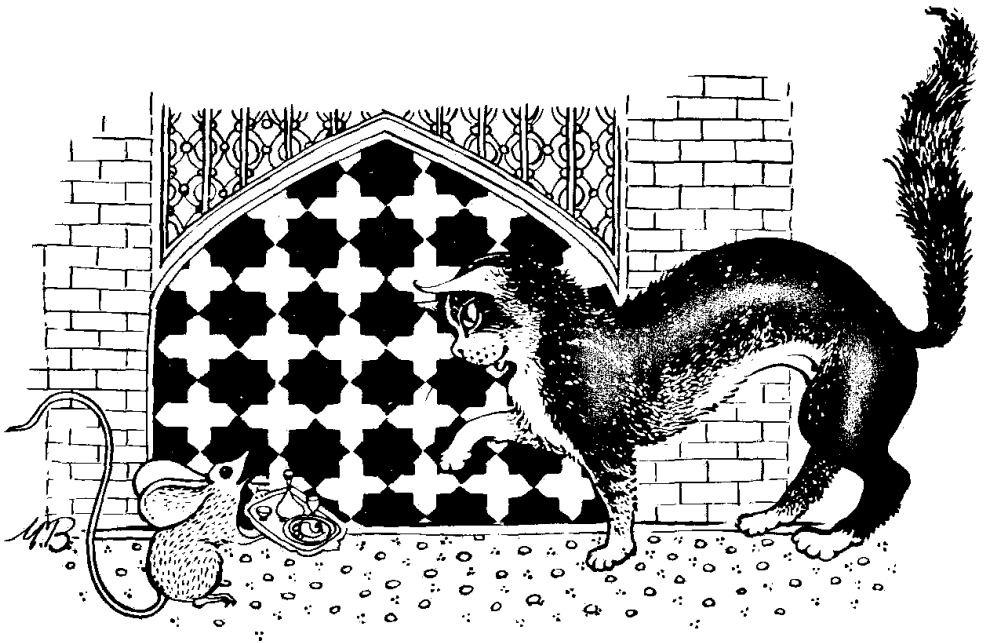
Immediately more than three hundred thousand mounted young mice said goodbye to their wives and children. The wives, shedding a dew of tears on the ground, ran beside the heroes marching bravely to battle, each armed with sword in hand. In Kerman also, during the next few days, more than twenty thousand cats came from the streets, alleys, houses, and bazaars, to meet on the edge of the moor outside the city. Their wives and children shed bitter tears, too, for they had little hope of ever seeing their loved ones again.

The cat-army advanced from the city and the mice swarmed from the desert to meet on the moor. They romped onto the field, bellowing with all their might. Such miaowing! Such squeaking! The ground shook as they thundered towards one another.

It was a frightful battle. Uncounted cats and mice were killed or wounded. But the cats were bigger and stronger, and they were just about to win when a mouse tripped the Cat-King with his spear. Before he could regain his footing he was surrounded by squeaking mice who tied him up securely with ropes. The other cats were frightened at this and ran away helter-skelter until they were lost in a cloud of dust.

Then there was a triumphant procession. The mice dragged the struggling Cat-King before the Mouse-King, who was sitting on his royal elephant and surrounded by his body-guard. They all danced wildly round the helpless cat, prodding him with their spears. This enraged the Cat-King so much that he made a tremendous effort and broke all the ropes binding him. Then he leapt into the air and the mice scattered to escape their bellowing enemy, disappearing as fast as they could into every burrow and under every stone, while the Cat-King clutched as many as he could in his claws and threw them right and left.

Gone were the glorious royal elephant, the arms, and the crown. Soon there wasn't a mouse or cat left on the field except the dead and the dying. Mice have always hidden in their holes since then and no small animal has trusted a cat or tried to be friends with him ever since. And this is why the cat is such a lonely creature and does not enjoy a happy family life as the mice do, but depends on human beings to look after him.



# black colt

## PART ONE

TO THE EAST OF PERSIA there once reigned a great shah who had a wife of marvellous beauty. No sweeter flower was ever seen in any garden. Upon her the shah showered gifts of rubies and pearls, and in his heart she reigned as queen of queens.

In the course of time this queen bore the shah a son who, as he was the child of a great monarch, a *shah-zadeh*, was named Malik Khorsheed (The Sun Prince). The boy's face shone with the beauty of the sun, and he was lusty and strong of limb. His parents' joy in him knew no bounds. But when the soothsayers of the country came to read his future in the stars, they reported that many evils would befall him, and that his virtues, for a time, would only work him unhappiness.

As the years passed the prince grew into as handsome and intelligent a child as was to be found anywhere in the land. Under the wise instruction of his teachers he was taught all the knowledge of his time, and became expert in the arts of horsemanship, falconry, the hunting of leopards, and the various skills of archery. Though of a slender build, such was his strength and daring that he would wrestle with bears and tigers. All agreed that there had never been a more excellent pupil, and his parents were delighted with his progress.

But as he passed his days in his favorite pastime, hunting in the woods and over the mountains, the time of predicted mis-

fortune came to its full, and the beloved queen fell ill and died. No words can describe the sorrow that now came upon Malik and his father, and the bitter days passed slowly for them. But their common grief drew the two the closer together, and as his father superintended the prince's upbringing his heart was filled with an even greater devotion for him.

Nothing, however, seemed to amuse the young prince after his mother's death, so the shah decided he needed a companion to beguile his heart from its pining. Therefore he ordered a search to be made for the finest colt in the world, and the people, eager to see their beloved prince happy once more, looked about the land from east to west, and from north to south. And yet, for all this, no satisfactory colt could be found.

One day the Minister of the Right Hand and the Minister of the Left Hand came to the shah to inform him that a distinguished Dervish, a wandering holy man, was at the gate of the palace seeking audience. And when he was admitted the Dervish said he wished to present a colt to the prince. Lo and behold, it was the colt of the shah's dreams! Black as coal, with a single star-shaped white marking on its forehead. The monarch thanked the Dervish most sincerely and begged him to stay as a guest for as long as he wished. But he refused politely, and said he only wished to speak to Malik before leaving.

"My dear son," he told him, "this colt responds well to love. Love him, therefore, and never let anyone harm him." And with this he was gone.

Joy entered Malik's heart once more, and the whole court was happy because of it. As the months passed a deep and abiding love grew between the prince and his colt, whom he had named *Korreh-ē-Siyah* (Black Colt.) So close did they grow to each other that each eventually came to understand the other's meaning. Indeed, Black Colt would often break into human speech.

Each afternoon, as soon as his studies were finished, Malik would run directly to the stable and there, after patting his colt and kissing the white star on his forehead, he would hold out his two hands filled with lumps of sugar for the colt to nuzzle into and pick up delicately with his teeth one at a time. Then



the prince would saddle him with his own hands and ride out into the palace gardens.

What a picture they made! The handsome youth in gold-trimmed clothes, his face shining with pride and joy, mounted on his coal-black steed with proudly arching neck and flowing mane and tail, his hooves scarcely touching the ground. And all around them blossomed the garden bordered with pomegranates and arbored with white and red roses. White poppies waved in the breeze of their passing, while the multicolored lilies and striped flaring tulips vied with each other. The colors blended together like a mass of fireworks, and their scents wafted sweeter than the interior of a perfumer's shop.

After an hour the prince would lead him back to the stable, and he returned to the palace to spend the hours before bedtime with his father, so that his loneliness might seem less burdensome.

But though the shah was content that the years should pass like this, it was the custom of the country that he must have a queen, and therefore the court and the people begged him to marry again. He put them off for as long as he could, but finally he had to agree and take another wife. His new queen was young and beautiful, but she failed to bring either love or happiness to the palace. Nor did she bear the shah another child.

And so the queen became bitter and jealous, for the shah still spent much of his time with Malik. And though she pretended to be a tender mother to the prince, she secretly plotted his ruin. For when the shah was won over by the care she seemed to show for Malik she meant to poison his mind against him with false complaints.

Malik in his nobility and honesty believed in her pretended kindness, and although he could not love her as he had loved his own mother, he was courteous to her at all times. But one afternoon, as he was taking his usual ride, Black Colt warned him of the new queen's designs to separate him from his father.

"You are in deadly danger, dear Malik. Be on your guard and do not trust the queen, for her intentions are dishonest. She is jealous of your father's love for you."

"Dear Black Colt, you must be mistaken. She could not be so

bad as that," said Malik, stiffening. Indeed he was horrified, for his mother had taught him to be noble and true in all things, and he could not think anything but good of all people, especially the new queen. But Black Colt warned him to be careful, and to watch her closely, and then he would see for himself that it was true.

From that time forward he avoided the queen as much as possible, and spent even more time at his studies and with his father. But the queen was furious that she had failed to win Malik's attention and decided she must get rid of him for good and all. In this she asked the servants she had brought with her from her father's home to help her, and they, since they were subject to her will, really had no choice in the matter but had to do as they were told. She decided to have a deep pit dug along the path Malik took to the stable, and to cover it with branches and leaves. Into this Malik would fall and never be found again, for the earth would immediately be piled back and he would be buried alive. Clapping her hands, the queen ordered that the pit should be dug immediately.

As the proverb says, however, "Man proposes, but God disposes." It happened that the next afternoon Malik took a different path to the stable rather earlier than usual and Black Colt was able to warn him of the trap that was being laid for him. The prince refused to believe that anybody could be so wicked as to want to kill him, much though he loved the colt and wanted to believe him.

"Nevertheless, my prince, what I say is true," said the colt. "You have only to look back along your usual path and you will see them digging."

Sure enough, there were men at work. Malik was stunned when he saw how he might have tumbled to his death.

Now the queen was angrier than ever when she saw that her plan had failed. The servants feared for their very lives and suggested that Malik's breakfast, which he always had taken up to his own room, should be poisoned. But that very afternoon Black Colt warned the prince not to eat anything that was brought him the next day. The queen pretended to be worried about his health, and asked why he had left his breakfast un-

touched. Malik replied politely enough, he thanked her for her concern, but it was nothing to worry about as he had simply not felt hungry at the time.

Now the queen was in a frenzy at being so thwarted and suspected that someone had been betraying her plans to him. But who could it be? She trusted her own servants, and none but they were in the plot. Had Malik some magic power about him? Impossible; he was only a stupid, simple-minded boy! Wondering who had protected him worried her even more than her failure to kill him. In her bitter hatred she decided to hurt him through the things he cared for. Ah yes, there was that black beast, Korreh-e-Siyah. Malik loved him beyond anything else but his father. Well, she would find some way to destroy it. If she could only do that then Malik would be heart-broken and would have no further strength to struggle against her.

The queen's new plan was so cunning that even the shah and his court aided her willingly. The next day the Qamar Vizier, who was the head of the queen's personal household, brought word to the shah that his mistress was desperately ill. When the shah hurried to her bedside she looked near to death. Her face and body had turned as yellow as a sun-flower, and as she tossed from side to side her bones gave off a horrible crackling, especially in the area of the ribs. None of the court doctors was able to tell him the name of her illness.

In spite of the utmost endeavors, neither medicine nor treatment brought a change for the better in her condition. Finally the queen sent for the shah and told him in a sad, weak voice that only one thing could save her. In her homeland she had heard of a cure for this sickness but she hardly dared suggest it. Of course, the shah insisted that she tell him, and she faltered out that what she needed was a three-day diet of the meat from a coal-black colt with a star-shaped white patch on its forehead. But where would they find such an animal at short notice?

Then the queen's courtiers and her doctors informed the shah what he knew well enough himself. There was such an animal in his own stables, and no time should be lost in killing it to save the queen. The shah was deeply upset.

"I know what you say is true. But the colt belongs to Malik and is his only companion. It would be a terrible thing to kill it."

"Is not the life of the queen more valuable than that of a mere animal?" asked the chief doctor sternly. "Surely another colt could be found for your son? We have no time to waste, you know."

The shah unwillingly agreed, and gave the order for the colt to be killed. And then he unhappily wondered how he could possibly break the news to his son. In the end he decided to find another colt first, and then break the news of his favorite's death, which was to be killed the next day while the prince was at his lessons.

That afternoon, however, Malik was amazed to find Black Colt so sad. He showed none of the usual signs of joy upon seeing the lad, such as neighing and standing on his hind-legs, and the young prince tenderly asked him what was wrong.

"Is it something I've done?" he asked.

"Ah, brave and honorable prince, how could you do anything to wrong me?" Black Colt whinnied. "But a dangerous storm is brewing over our heads. Your treacherous step-mother has at last succeeded in her plans against us. I am to be killed tomorrow morning so my flesh can cure her illness. She has brought this about as the one way to hurt you most."

"No one but my father could order such a thing, and I'm sure he would never allow it."

"But the queen has persuaded him to do it."

"She is very, very ill. How can she have done it?"

"She is only pretending to be ill. Early in the morning, when no one is looking, she mixes bright yellow turmeric powder with olive oil and carefully smears it all over her body. Then she folds fine Persian crisp-bread, which is as thin as a sheet of paper, into a large cloth and wraps it a round her sides. Then it sounds as if her bones are breaking when she rolls over. It was she who suggested only my meat could cure her, and her doctor agreed. Your father didn't want to do it, but they made him."

Rage and fear filled Malik's mind. He was in torture at the thought of never seeing Black Colt any more. Even tears were no relief.

"I must do something at once! I'll run to the shah and tell him it's a plot."

"No, wait, my friend, wait! " Black Colt called after him as he was about to rush off to the palace. "Seeing your father would be of no use. He is as upset about this as you are, but he cannot help himself. No one would believe anything you said against the queen. They would persuade your father you had made it up in order to save me. There is only one way to save us both, and that is to escape."

"Tell me how. I'll do whatever you say."

"Watch the time carefully tomorrow morning. As soon as the clock strikes ten you will hear me neigh. That is when they are coming to the stable to take me away. When they lead me to the garden where my throat is to be cut, you will hear me neigh for a second time. And the third time you hear it they will be tying my legs down. You must try and reach me before that. If you come after you may never see me alive again."

"Now your teacher has been ordered to keep you in the school-room all tomorrow morning and not to let you out under any circumstances. So take with you to school a bag of ashes and a bag of gold coins and keep them close by you. When you hear me neighing you must find some excuse and ask to leave, and if he keeps refusing do not hesitate to throw the ashes in his face and blind his eyes. As you run out he will, no doubt, order your school-fellows to bring you back. When you see them coming, just scatter the coins on the ground and they will be so busy picking them up that they will not follow you."

"When you find me, pretend it is by accident and you know nothing of what is happening; say you were only disturbed by my neighing and came to see what was wrong. Then order the guards to tell you what they mean to do, and pretend to be upset by their answer but agree that it shall be done... Now don't interrupt me. I only said *pretend*, didn't I? That's better! ... As I was saying, they'll be so relieved to find you do not mean to oppose the shah's orders that they'll allow you anything else you want, so ask for a farewell ride on me. Then jump on my back, ride round the garden three times and leave the rest to me."

"Yes, that's clear enough," said the prince, after listening more or less patiently to everything Black Colt told him to do.

"Heir of kings," said the horse again, "may I ask you one question? If you knew that you had to leave your land, your people and your family, for my sake, would you still do as I ask?"

"Of course, my friend!" exclaimed the prince, stroking the colt's forehead. "I'd rather die than let you be killed in such a horrible way."

It was very dreary the next morning. The sky was as heavy and overcast as Malik's heart. All the preparations were complete and the royal servants went to the stable to fetch out Black Colt. When they laid hold of his bridle he neighed for the first time. But Malik did not appear, and he was led out into the garden, where he neighed for the second time. Still Malik had not appeared.

The queen was watching all this from her window, delighted that at least one of her plans was being carried out as she wished. As Black Colt disappeared round a corner of the palace she clapped her hands with evil joy, and began whispering fierce spells against the prince in order to destroy him.

Now Black Colt was laid down upon the ground and his legs were tied firmly with ropes. For the third time he neighed so loud and hopelessly that the sound echoed over the countryside. And Malik had not come to help him!

Malik had asked his teacher's permission to leave at the first neigh, but he had been refused. Going back to his seat he took the two bags from their hiding-place and opened the one filled with ashes. At Black Colt's second neigh he went up to the teacher's desk and asked again, holding the bag behind his back. Now the teacher loved Malik, and it grieved him to have to refuse when he saw how worried he looked, but he had been ordered not to let him out and so told him to go back to his seat. The teacher was very surprised when, instead of obeying, Malik threw the bagful of ashes into his face, just as he was opening his mouth to repeat what he'd said!

Spluttering and sneezing, weeping and wheezing, whooping and hiccoughing, the poor teacher staggered about the room as

Malik dashed out of the door, seizing his other bag as he passed his seat. Managing at last to spit enough ashes out of his mouth to get his breath, the teacher told the prince's astonished classmates to run after him and bring him back. Out they all rushed with happy yells to give chase, when what should they see bouncing and rolling down the path but a stream of golden coins. Well, this was something even better to chase, and so they scurried hither and thither after the coins, thinking they could always catch Malik afterwards. And so they gave him time to get away to the garden.

But it happened that Malik was in such a hurry that he did not look where he was going, and actually took a wrong turning, so that he was running full tilt *away* from the garden when he heard Black Colt's last desperate neighing in the distance. With no time to lose, the prince rushed back along the path and jumped over the low wall surrounding the garden, pushing thru bushes and trampling over flower-beds, kicking the heads off poppies and tulips, in his anxiety to get to Black Colt before they killed him. A guard had already drawn an enormous scimitar from his belt and was about to slash the razor-sharp blade thru the colt's throat when Malik burst in breathlessly upon them.

Gasping for them to stop, the prince ran across the lawn and drew a dagger from his belt. With this he freed Black Colt's legs and then turned sternly to face the dumbfounded guards. The colt's eyes sparkled with love and gratitude as Malik took him by the halter, whispering gentle encouragement and patting his neck.

"What is the meaning of this?" he shouted at the guards, who shrank back in terror, for they had never seen the prince angry before, and knew that what they had been about to do was not the sort of thing that would please him!

"Answer me, you dogs!" roared the prince.

The captain of the guards finally stepped forward and saluted. "Highness," he stuttered timidly, "this was done by order of His Majesty the Shah."

"I don't believe a word of it. I'll have the truth or it will be the worse for you. Speak!"

The poor guards huddled together, and now one and now another told him of the queen's illness and what food had been suggested for her cure. Malik was so angry at hearing this all over again that he would have bellowed a refusal, had not Black Colt nuzzled him gently from behind and given him a low whinny, as much as to say he was to agree with them, as they had planned the night before, and then to ask for a last ride.

The prince stopped himself as the refusal was on his very lips and drew a deep breath. Meeting the colt's eye he nodded, to show he understood, and then spoke more quietly: "Well, in that case, I suppose the queen's health is more important than the life of my animal. But before you carry out your order, I should like to take a last ride."

The guards could see nothing wrong in so reasonable a request. They were so relieved that the captain himself ran all the way to the palace for permission from the shah to delay the killing. And the shah, who was most surprised at Malik's agreeing so readily, knowing how much the colt meant to him, gave it without hesitation. A saddle and bridle made of crocodile skin and inlaid with precious stones were buckled on and Malik mounted.

While the shah and queen looked on from their different windows, and the guards and courtiers watched in the gardens, the two friends circled the grounds. All felt great pity at this last ride of the prince and his beloved colt. Then, when they had trotted around three times, and were in full view of everybody, Black Colt called, "Here we go, my friend; sit tight! "

With a short burst of speed and a graceful bound the colt sprang into the air and carried Malik flying aloft. The shah, the queen, and the whole court had to stand there with their mouths open, wide-eyed and frightened, able to do nothing about it, as the two soared higher and higher into the clear blue sky.

His father gave a cry of horrified guilt as he saw his beloved son being carried away from him, and the queen fainted with terror at the magic she beheld. The whole court lamented the loss of their prince, but they could not help admiring the grace and beauty of both colt and rider as they rose higher and higher into the brilliant sky. Malik was dressed in a royal robe of gold



and red silk which gleamed in the sun, while the colt's long silky tail streamed in a black plume behind him, and his mane was like a flowing banner.

As for Malik, he was filled with excitement as they raced thru the sky and he looked down on the land beneath him. His heart beat loudly and he shouted for joy. Down there was the palace; and the people in the garden staring up into the sky were no more than tiny dots.

Upwards and still upwards soared the two friends until the gardens, the surrounding fields, and even the snow-covered peaks of the purple Elburz Mountains, were almost out of sight. On and on they flew, until mountains, valleys, deserts, and the great, gleaming oceans, were mere specks below them.

"How large does the earth look now?" asked Black Colt.

"It is no more than the size of a watermelon," Malik exclaimed.

They sped on still higher in silence.

"And how large is the earth now?"

"Good gracious! It's no bigger than a ball," Malik answered, amazed at the endless vastness of space about him. And still they soared upwards into the boundless sky.

"Now how large does the earth seem to you?"

"Oh!" cried Malik in wonder, "there is no earth. Even the sun has shrunk to the size of an orange. How high we must be! Shall we see angels soon?"

"Angels are everywhere! You don't have to come up here to find them. And now let us fly down to earth again and seek a new life."

## PART TWO

It was midday, and the wind was whispering softly in the trees, as Black Colt and the prince floated down to earth. Trotting onwards in their journey, and only stopping to rest from time to time, they finally reached the capital city of the Shah of Western Persia and halted outside the gate.

"It would be best if we separated here for a time," the colt told Malik. "But you may be sure that I shall be ready to serve

you for ever more, since you have sacrificed so much, abandoning your people and your own comfort, to save my life."

"But why must we separate?" the prince asked fearfully. "I shall be lost without you. And where am I to go, a friendless stranger in a foreign land?"

"You will find your own way and make new friends. If I stayed with you the people here would only cause you trouble by trying to take me from you. And even without me an adventurous time lies ahead of you. But I am not deserting you. Cut a handful of hairs from my tail, and always keep them with you. Whenever you need my help, or want to see me, just burn one of the hairs and I will come to you immediately."

The prince decided Black Colt knew best, since he had been right in so many other things before, and therefore cut the hairs from his tail and wrapped them in a silk handkerchief.

"Now take off your royal clothes and hide them, for no one must know who you are or where you come from".

Malik did not understand why, but again did as he was told, carefully folding away the garments into the saddle-bag on the colt's back, and asked what he must do next.

"Go into the city and seek your fortune. But keep your identity a secret. And now, dear Malik, I must leave you for a while."

"Goodbye, my friend. I shall miss you very much, but I will try to be patient and trust in your wisdom," said Malik, kissing him between the eyes and patting his neck. Then Black Colt galloped away, leaving the prince dressed only in a white shirt and black trousers.

Cold, tired, and sick with loneliness, Malik stood for a time before the gates of the city, uncertain what he should do next. He would seem like a poor boy, a wanderer from other lands, and no one would receive him as an honored guest into his home. Yet he would have to find somewhere to stay. He would have to work for his living.

First of all he had to hide his long and curling black hair, for the poor usually had theirs cut short. Therefore he asked a goatherd he met on the road for a goat's stomach with which to make a cap. And after he had washed it he shaped and fitted

it to his head so that all his hair was hidden, and he appeared to be bald. Then, content with his new appearance, although he did not realise how odd it made him look, or how much larger his dark, almond-shaped eyes now seemed, he went into the city.

Longing for Black Colt to come back and ease his loneliness, he wandered through the streets, crossing bazaars and gardens aimlessly in search of somewhere to sleep. At last he reached what looked like a palace, surrounded by the most beautiful gardens. Here he sat down in the shade of a tree beside a running brook of fresh water. How his whole body ached from his long wanderings, hungry and homeless!

While he was sitting there an old man came by, grey-haired and wrinkled about his eyes. He was so busy with his own thoughts that he passed by the prince without even noticing him, but Malik so wanted someone to talk to that he called after him, "Peace be with you, respectable father! "

This made the old man jump; but he turned round and greeted him in return, asking him who he was and what he wanted there.

"I have only just arrived in this city and know no one here," Malik replied. "Would you mind telling me whose garden this is? "

"It belongs to the Shah of Western Persia, my child, and I am his gardener. But, come, you look sad and tired. Is there anything I can do for you? "

"I have come from a distant land and am all alone in the world. I am looking for work and somewhere to live."

"Well, do you know anything about flowers? "

Now this question delighted Malik, for he had learned all about them in the gardens of his own palace, so he told the old man that he loved flowers very much and had found out as much about them as he could.

"Good. Then I can give you work here in the garden, if you like. You may be my apprentice."

The prince could not thank him enough. The next day he set to work, following the gardener's careful instructions, and before long, although he was only an apprentice, he did his job as well as his master. He worked hard all day long, and paid as much



care and attention to small tasks as to large ones. The days and nights passed quietly and happily for him, and his polite and gentle manner attracted all those whom he met.

But Malik was especially happy when he found time to spend the occasional hour with Black Colt. In Persia it sometimes becomes so hot that people take a nap during the heat of the afternoon. At this time he was free to meet his friend, and so, carefully hiding himself in the center of a clump of trees, he would burn one of the hairs Black Colt had given him and the animal would instantly appear before him.

It was a joyful meeting! Throwing off his skull-cap and clothes, he plunged into a pool to bathe and then changed into his royal garments, and rode the colt gaily thru the gardens and woods. When their hour of freedom and recreation was over, Malik came back and changed again into the ragged bald-headed gardener's apprentice working hard among the flowers. Time passed happily in this way and Malik was able to let the colt know how he was.

With no other distractions, he poured all his talents into his work. Ideas came to him for redesigning the flower-beds which he discussed with his master. The old man objected at first, but then he thought, "The young see everything with a fresh eye, and perhaps a greater imagination for beauty. I'll let the boy go ahead, for his heart is at one with the flowers."

So Malik transplanted whole beds into new and more beautiful arrangements. The flowers were built up into towers, pyramids and archways, or drawn into patterns on the ground like carpets; beside every fourth bloom a lighted candle was placed level with it. Down the arbors and along the trellises there were cages filled with multi-colored birds, different colored lamps and diverse globes of water. Green bushes and small trees were dotted here and there among the flowers, and mirrors were set up to reflect the lights. At night the sight was wonderful, a sheer blaze and flickering of living color, punctuated by the singing of the birds and the playing of flutes. Even the most insensible were carried away by the sights, the sounds and the scents. Until then the striking forms and colors of the shah's garden had always been taken for granted by those who visited

the palace, and by those within it, but now they became a topic for conversation.

Another task which the head gardener allowed to Malik was that of carrying bouquets to the palace for the three princesses, and for decorating the many rooms. It relieved him from long wearying walks through the endless corridors, and he knew he could trust to his apprentice's sense of beauty. Here too, Malik added the talents of his scholarship, for each bouquet was arranged in a strikingly different manner. And to these he added a poem which not only mentioned the virtues of every flower in them, but sagely commented upon them. The people of the shah's court were amazed and asked each other whether the gardener had been consulting with scholars and wise men about his daily tasks.

Peri-zaad, the youngest of the shah's daughters, was especially impressed. Her name in Persian meant "Fairy-born" for in that kingdom it has always been the custom to name girls after flowers, precious stones or stars, and other things of beauty, while boys are called after the noblest human qualities. The young princess surpassed the moon in beauty. She was fresher than a rose at dawn, her voice was a sweet music, and her eyes shone like those of a gazelle. Such was the gentleness and sincerity of her nature that to know her was to love her. Indeed many of the most handsome sons from the greatest families, and princes from as far away as India and China, had offered everything they had to win her heart. But she did not care for their attentions; it was enough to live happily with her father in the palace.

Now Peri-zaad was not content to wonder over the changes in the garden, like everyone else, but determined to find out the meaning of this for herself. So one Spring afternoon she set out in search of the gardener. The red-gold sun was sinking behind the dome-shaped peak of the Demavend, eternally covered in snow, and the clear sky was turning a purple-blue. The grounds were starred with crocuses, marigolds, daffodils and tulips; with nodding bushes of lilacs, roses, jasmine, and columbines. A light breeze bore the smell of orange-blossom thru the air; petals

trembled beneath it and water splashed from the fountains into silence.

The old man was most amused when Peri-zaad told him that everyone thought the remarkable changes were his doing, and chuckled as he shook his head:

"No, the tide of my life is lapping gently down the sands of time, princess. These vigorous waves of beauty that have set the palace wondering are the work of someone younger than I."

When the princess asked him whom he could mean, he silently pointed to Malik, bent to his work in the distance.

"That ugly, bald-headed one!" exclaimed the astonished princess.

"Ah, beauty is not a thing of the face alone."

"But the poems . . . what about the poems? You don't mean to say *he* wrote them?" The old man nodded and smiled and Peri-zaad turned away, hardly able to face the idea of talking to someone so ugly. But finally her curiosity was too much for her and she went to stare at him in wonder.

Malik heard quick footsteps along the path and looked up to see the most beautiful girl he had ever set eyes on approaching him. For a moment he wondered if she were real or whether he was dreaming. He jumped to his feet in amazement and stood silently before her, his eyes politely lowered but secretly marveling.

"You're a stranger, aren't you? Where do you come from?" she asked him. Malik's heart beat faster and faster as he bowed low before her, and for the first time wished he could tell who he really was and stand revealed in his royal clothes.

"I come from a long way off and have no relations here," he told her, looking up and into her eyes. His pulse beat even faster for this, and as for Peri, she saw that his eyes were beautiful and not ugly, as she had first thought, and she blushed outright. To hide her confusion she complimented him on his work and asked him if he was happy and then, when he thanked her, she wanted to know if he was anxious to return home.

"Not any longer," said Malik boldly.

"Well, I am . . . I mean, *we* are very happy to have you here,"

the princess replied in confusion, and then hurried away to hide the fact that she was blushing even more than ever.

Malik stood gazing after her for a long, long time, and then turned slowly back to his work. But for the rest of the day he could see only her face before him. Of course, he told himself sadly, she was not likely to come back and talk to a ragged, ugly apprentice like him again. She would not fall in love with him. She would not even give him another thought.

But he was wrong, for she did come back again and again. At first she showed interest only in his talents as a gardener, and took every opportunity to discuss it casually with him. But gradually she began to sense there was something more to this apprentice. On every subject they discussed they were sure to be of one mind. There was nothing mean in his character, and she was puzzled at his effortless courtly manners. Each time she came to see him she felt more and more drawn towards him.

Finally Peri had to admit to herself that she was deeply in love with the apprentice. But there was no way of getting to know his feelings in the matter, for one in his humble position would not dare to speak out, and she, as a princess, a young girl without experience, could not ask him herself. Her pride and her anger could find no answer to this problem, nor could they banish the young man from her mind. Pining and fretting made her grow thin and pale; she lost her appetite and was unable to sleep. At length she was too weak even to leave her room.

Then one morning, as she was sitting listlessly by her window, there came to her mind an ancient custom reserved for the shah's daughters. When a princess reached the age of sixteen she could signify to her father a wish to get married by means of a symbol: the message was passed on to him by sending a water-melon pierced to the center by a knife. This possible solution to her problem delighted Peri, who immediately sent for her two sisters and asked if they too wished to get married. All finally agreed that though they had been happy in the palace, the time had come, and so the shah was sent on their behalf three water-melons. The first was over-ripe and signified the eldest princess; the second was just yellow and stood for the middle princess; and for the youngest they sent a fresh green fruit. They were all



placed together on a silver tray, each pierced to the centre by a golden knife and covered with silk brocade.

At first the shah was surprised to receive this gift. And when he understood what it meant he was amused at his daughters' daring, and the subtlety with which they had made their request. Now it was further the custom that no youth could ask for the hand of a princess; the shah would order the young men of noble families to present themselves at the palace, where she with his consent chose one from among them. Accordingly, the shah sent out a proclamation that his daughters meant to marry, and therefore all the young men of eligible family were to appear before them on a given day.

There was great excitement in the land at the royal proclamation, for everyone knew of the shah's wealth and the beauty of his daughters. Preparations were made to send the finest young men to the court from all the noble families. They streamed to the capital from every quarter, dressed in velvets of the finest dye, embroidered with silver and gold and pearls, riding magnificent horses whose sumptuous leather saddles were decorated with precious stones. Behind them bustled courtiers, and uniformed soldiers armed with sword, bow, and shields. Everyone was outdoors in the capital ready to watch the noblemen enter and make them welcome.

The appointed day arrived and more than a hundred young men gathered in the great audience chamber of the palace, lined up on this side and that. At the far end the shah sat on his throne with his three daughters standing beside him, each holding a red apple in her hand. When a princess picked out the man she wished to marry she would toss the apple to him, and if he caught it the shah proclaimed her choice.

It was customary to allow any person of any rank whatsoever into the shah's audience-chamber to consult with him about their various needs and complaints for as long as he sat there on his throne. Many, therefore, had crowded in to witness the choice of the three princesses, and Peri was hoping to see there the gardener's apprentice. "Oh," she prayed, "if only he would just step inside the doors to watch the ceremony out of curiosity." Still, she could not see him at that moment.

Everyone watched breathlessly as the princesses walked slowly down the hall, first before one rank of young men, and then before the other. They, for their part could scarcely breathe, their hearts were hammering so hard, each one hoping that he would be the one chosen. The first princess tossed her apple to the son of the Vizier of the Right Hand, and the second hers to the son of the Vizier of the Left Hand. The two men were the envy of all the others as they stepped out of the line and bowed proudly before the shah, holding the apples in their right hands. They were tall and handsome, but inwardly terribly conceited, for they had both been confident that they were the ones who would be chosen.

Now everyone watched Peri, for she had not yet tossed her apple. There she stood, searching all over the hall with her large solemn eyes, clutching her apple. But although she looked carefully in the face of everyone there, the face she most wanted to see was not among them. The shah and his ministers were waiting. The young men were waiting. The whole court was waiting. And Peri just stood there waiting too, making no move to throw her apple.

Her father grew impatient and urged her to choose. Peri shook her head and continued to look round the crowd. Her father now grew angry and ordered her to throw the apple. And again she shook her head.

"What's the matter with you? Aren't any of these young men good enough for you?" he wanted to know. But Peri continued to look around the crowd.

By this time the shah was furious and secretly ordered his guards to go out into the city and bring in every youth they could find, regardless of his social rank, believing that this humiliation would bring his daughter to her senses. But Peri was unmoved by her father's fury and just stood there clutching the apple.

One of the first young men that the guards met was Malik, who was at work in the garden. But he protested when they ordered him to go to the palace:

"Why should I go against my will? I have done nothing wrong."

"But the shah has ordered it and must be obeyed."

"Has he something to complain against me? . . . or is this one of your jokes? "

"We are perfectly serious. But don't be afraid. Great affairs are going on at the palace and we have orders to bring you there."

"Now I know you can't be serious. Why should the shah want to consult me? "

"Either you go there willingly or we'll force you to go. Don't you understand, you idiot, that this might be the making of a fortune for you beyond your dreams? "

Malik could not understand what was going on, but shrugged his shoulders and went when he realized the guards were serious. But at the same time he was angry that he, the son of a shah, should be forced to do anything against his will. As he entered the palace he saw other guards herding more young men before them into the great audience chamber. The noblemen whom Peri had scorned shrank back against the walls and yielded space to the low-born newcomers whose contact they dreaded.

By now the shah was somewhat horrified at the thought that Peri might be mad enough to choose a humble husband from among these unknown youths. How unthinkable to have a common son-in-law! Nevertheless, in the hope of insulting her into a better frame of mind he turned sternly to her and said, "My daughter, if you can find no one to your liking among these nobles, perhaps one of the newcomers will be more to your liking."

Not a sound was heard as Peri slowly looked from man to man. And then a brilliant smile lit up her face, for she had seen where Malik was standing, looking the ugliest of them all with his torn clothes and bald head. Without any more hesitation she threw the apple to him.

While he gazed at it, too bewildered to speak, people began to clear their throats in embarrassment and horror. The shah could not hide his rage and shame, try how he might. His face turned red, then blue, then black with fury, and he gnawed the ends of his moustaches so rapidly you might have thought he meant to swallow himself inside-out.

When he had at last regained control over himself the shah told the two young men chosen by his older daughters to stand before him and gave his royal consent and blessings, ignoring Peri and Malik completely. Then he ordered the heralds to announce the forthcoming weddings of the older sisters and extended his personal thanks to all the young men who had attended the choosing through the Court Vizier, inviting them all to remain as guests at the wedding banquet. Then at last he turned on Peri and Malik and angrily commanded that his own beloved daughter should be banished from the palace and deprived of the honors of a princess. And with that he stood up abruptly and strode out.

As soon as he had left a great buzz of gossip arose. Courtiers and noble visitors spoke in shocked tones. The two princesses followed their father haughtily, followed by the men they had chosen, ignoring completely the sister they had once loved so much. Then one by one the others withdrew into the palace, darting their cold and unfriendly glances at the guilty pair. But the common people who were left felt nothing but pity, for they loved the young couple. And when the shah's harsh orders were repeated outside the palace there was no-one who did not feel sorry for them. "But," they asked each other, shaking their heads in wonder, "what do you expect after making such a strange choice? Why on earth did she choose such an unworthy husband?"

Peri wasn't sad at all. What did she care about losing her privileges and the luxuries of the palace so long as she had the joy of winning Malik? Far from feeling envy at the great honors heaped upon her sisters and their husbands, she declared that if she had the same choice to make again, it would still be Malik she wanted. Even a mud cottage would seem like a palace if he were there with her.

Malik, however, was deeply troubled, whatever Peri might feel. Certainly he loved her, — and who wouldn't?— but he could not understand why she had chosen him at the cost of such sacrifice. He felt that he was somehow to blame for all she had lost; though he was overjoyed that he had been chosen yet he thought she had given up too much for him. He did not know

what to do. He might, for instance, reveal his true identity and appear before the shah dressed in all his royal finery. Perhaps then the shah would accept him as his son-in-law, and shower upon his favorite daughter all that was being prepared for her sisters. But Black Colt had advised him not to, and he trusted his friend. There was no end to this argument inside him.

Peri left her father's palace and went joyfully to live in Malik's small, dark cottage of dried clay. She entered the hut as gaily as a bird's song with the few things she had brought away with her and came slowly towards her husband. The fragrance of Persian-rose that perfumed her dress filled the room. Her soft voice throbbed with happiness as she greeted Malik. To him she seemed more like a dream-fairy than a living person.

"Princess, will you answer a question?" he said, as they sat side by side on an old Persian rug.

"Of course, I will answer anything you ask me," she said smiling.

"Then why, when you had so many handsome noblemen to choose from, did you take me . . . a poor ugly . . ."

Peri put her fingers to his lips to interrupt him: "You are neither poor nor ugly. Your heart is full of beauty. You are strong, yet gentle. There is only good in you, and I love you. For me these things are more precious than whether you are of noble birth or a beggar."

"And you are willing to live in this poor hut?"

"My dear husband, it will be Paradise to me."

"But surely you will miss all that you used to have?"

"Merely to be your devoted wife is all I want."

Malik overflowed with gratitude that Peri, his princess, should love him purely for himself. He kissed her over and over again. But at last, though reluctantly, he had to return to his duties in the garden.

Peri went about the household duties, humming a song that came from her heart. She swept the old carpet and cleaned every stick of meager furniture as if they were made of the most costly materials. For now they belonged to her and Malik and that made them more precious than gold and rubies. She clean-

ed the room with love and surveyed it with pride through the tears of happiness that dimmed her eyes.

Meanwhile, people were preparing for the royal wedding feasts thru all the land of Western Persia. For it was not just one but *two* marriages that they were celebrating. In every city or village the people made ready their colorful holiday clothes and rehearsed their dances. Persian drums and oboes would lead them thru the streets. All government officials, from the highest to the lowest, joined in the throngs of merry-makers who surged in and out of the houses. You could not hear yourself speak for the noise on that day.

In the palace the most sumptuous banquet was set, at which attended all the shah's ministers, the army officials and the chief noblemen. As was the custom, the celebrations lasted for a week. On the last day the shah showered rubies, pearls, and gold coins over the two brides and sent off each to her own palace, presented to them as a wedding gift from their father. They left attended by a huge procession made up of the courtiers, the ministers, the officers and the nobles, all of whom were invited to fresh feasts in the palaces of the brides.

But Peri and Malik were left out completely. The Shah had forbidden even the mention of their names in his presence. It was as if he had never had a third daughter.

### PART THREE

Though the passing of time strengthened the young couple's love, Malik missed Black Colt greatly, for he had not called the animal to him since his marriage for fear that Peri should discover his secret. One day, however, when he judged it was safe, he burned a hair from its tail, changed into his royal attire and, the two went riding. Hither and thither they galloped. How fine it felt! But it so chanced that Peri was out gathering flowers and looked up to see her husband transformed into another man in the distance. Hardly believing her eyes she went home in wonderment.

When Malik returned she looked at him quizzically. This made

him feel uncomfortable, and he asked if anything was wrong as she continued to gaze at him in this strange way, trying to work out how he could have changed so quickly. Finally she faltered, "Did you happen to ride a black colt today?"

Feeling guilty that he had kept his real identity a secret for so long, he decided to tell Peri the whole truth now that she had discovered a part of it for herself.

"A prince!" she exclaimed, when he had finished. "Are you really a prince? But why did you hide it from me?"

"Pearl of my heart, what else could I do? If I revealed myself it would only cause trouble between our two lands. My father and everyone else there thinks me dead now, but he would stop at nothing to get me back if he knew the truth. But then your father would not want to let me go, and the two would argue. Nor do I want my step-mother to find where I am, for she too would cause trouble. And beside all this, all I want to do is live quietly with you. So have patience, my dear, and all will work itself out in the end."

Thus they decided, and time passed smoothly as it had done before. But one day Peri's old nurse came to see her. She still lived in the palace, but had remained faithful to her charge. And now she brought bad news of the shah's illness: "He has grieved himself to a shadow over you, Princess," she told her grimly.

"Then why doesn't he relent. Surely it would do him good to know how happy I am with Malik."

"Your father is a proud man. He feels you have humiliated him publicly and now cannot bear even to speak your name."

"And what is being done about his illness?"

"Your two brothers-in-law have gone hunting for venison to make a special broth to give him strength. It is said to be the best cure for his disease. But so far they have not been able to find any deer."

"Oh, if only I could go to him, I'm sure I could cure him."

"That is impossible. You have been banished and cannot return. But I will come again and tell you how he goes on."

When Malik got home he was most disturbed to find Peri crying on account of her father's illness. She walked up and down the room wringing her hands and suddenly burst out, "It's

all my fault. Why didn't I go directly to my father and tell him frankly who I wished to marry? But I suppose even then he would not have agreed, and I did not wish to risk living without you, Malik. And yet he allowed me my own way, and permitted me to have my choice of husband in spite of everything. No parents who are loving and good wish to hurt their children. They only want everything perfect for them, and ask nothing in return but love and respect. But my father could not see what I saw in you and thought I was being foolish and selfish. He still loves me, even though he has sent me away to teach me a lesson. And I still love him and want to heal our quarrel. Oh, Malik, isn't there something you could do about this? "

"Of course, I'll do anything you want."

"Then go and catch a deer for my father's soup yourself. It is difficult to find them in our country at this season, but with Black Colt's help you could go as far as you wanted."

Malik left the house early next morning, assuring Peri that he would bring back what she wanted, and set off in a different direction to that taken by the brothers-in-law and their retinue of hunters.

Now they were riding along on fine horses, surrounded by their courtiers with hounds and falcons. Colorful tents furnished with silks and satins were carried by a caravan of mules and camels, and accompanied by a band of trumpets, horns, and drums, which was used to start the game. But though they went east and west, up mountains and down into valleys, they had no success. At the end of fourteen days and nights they were nearly exhausted. Then, as they approached the borders of Eastern Persia, they found tracks at last on the edge of a vast plain. Wonder of wonders! There was a great herd of deer peacefully grazing just in front of them.

The vizier's sons were overjoyed and set spurs to their tired horses to give chase at full speed. They had not followed the herd far across the border of the next kingdom before they saw in their way a city of tents, in the midst of which was a splendid pavillion of royal magnitude, crowned with a sphere of pure gold. As they chased nearer they saw the tents were surrounded by thousands of mounted negro warriors, dressed in rich ar-



mour that glittered in the sunlight. Their shields were polished like mirrors and short swords hung from their belts. All their horses were coal-black and covered with saddle-cloths of green brocade and white silks, on which rested red-leather saddles of the finest workmanship.

As the cavalcade from Western Persia swiftly continued to advance the guards rode out in front of them and shouted for them to stop.

"Whose encampment is this?" the brothers-in-law demanded.

"It belongs to the Shah-zadeh Malik Khorsheed, son of the shah of Eastern Persia," was the answer.

"And are the deer also his?"

"Of course. Who are you, and what has it got to do with you?"

"We are the sons-in-law of the shah of Western Persia and have been hunting a fortnight without seeing a single deer till just now."

"Wait here, and I'll see what the Shah-zadeh has to say."

But as soon as the captain of the guard turned his back the haughty sons of viziers rode off after the deer without waiting for permission. The guards gave chase, and before long the young men were surrounded and pulled from their horses. Without giving them time to think, the guards trussed their hands behind their backs and drove them stumbling towards the largest tent. Here they found a handsome young man with long black silken hair and deep-set dark eyes, richly clad as befitted a prince and seated on an ivory throne. Around him was a following of knights and nobles.

Of course, the two men did not recognize in this splendid personage the bald-headed gardener's apprentice whom they had hardly deigned to look upon in the palace garden. Dumbfounded and speechless, they bowed low before him. The prince ordered his guards to release them and asked what they meant by trespassing in his country. They told him in reply of their shah's illness, of the soup that was needed to restore his health, and of the ill-success of their hunting.

"We did not think your men had the right to prevent us from hunting down just one deer from such a large herd," they con-

tinued. "May we have your permission to take one back and so save the life of our ruler? "

"What is the life of your shah to me?" replied Malik, with lofty dignity. "Little does he care for the lives of others, that I know! "

"But surely," they pleaded humbly, "you must care when the life of a man is in danger; still more, if he is a father."

"That is true," Malik answered more softly. "I care for the life of any man, regardless of who he is. But tell me, is it considered right in Western Persia to enter another's land and take what you need by force? "

The two young men shook their heads and admitted they had done wrong.

"I am willing to let you have as many deer as you like," Malik continued, but only on one condition. Since my men captured you fairly, you are, in fact, my slaves. So before I let you go, you must accept my brand on your back and be mine to command.

The proud noblemen goggled at Malik in horror and amazement. They, the proud masters of so many men, to be branded the slaves of a foreign prince? Never! But they were his prisoners and it was no use refusing, or worse might happen to them. At the very least they would have to return home in disgrace and with no game, and the shah might die because of their failure. They consulted each other in whispers in their perplexity. In Western Persia an ill man was counting on them; and here in Eastern Persia a stubborn man was waiting for their decision.

"No one in our land will know what has happened here," they reasoned together. "And these people, including their prince, neither know any of our people or are likely to meet them. It is therefore wiser to agree to what this arrogant man demands, since no one will ever find out; it is better to get the deer and save our fame, even at such a heavy price."

Reluctantly, therefore, the two agreed, and slaves were sent to fetch a large iron seal on which was written "Slave of Malik Khorsheed." Sons of viziers, and sons-in-law of the shah though they were, they were forced to bare their backs before everyone

in the camp as the seal was dipped into a dark blue dye and pressed onto the skin. It stained so deeply that it was impossible to remove, even if it were scrubbed a thousand times.

When this was done, Malik told them they could have whatever deer they wished, but without the head and neck, which were considered not worthy to serve as food for a shah. The bodies were strapped to horses and, giving thanks to the prince, the two men rode swiftly away.

"Well done, my dear prince!" Black Colt neighed admiringly. "That should serve as a useful lesson to the arrogant."

"It is all thanks to your help, my friend. I couldn't have managed this without you," Malik admitted, patting the colt's neck. The heads and necks of the deer were loaded onto the back of a mule, and as they rode away the whole encampment disappeared magically behind them. When they looked back there was nothing left on the vast empty plain.

Riding swiftly through the land, they easily outdistanced the suite of the brothers-in-law, which could only travel slowly on account of all the people and baggage. Soon they arrived at the gates of the capital, where Malik changed once more into his rags and skull-cap and dismissed Black Colt. Then, leading the mule behind him, he entered the city and came to the poor mud cottage where Peri was eagerly awaiting him.

Joyfully she set to work on the meat he had brought. And even though the humble head and neck were considered beneath a shah's notice, she prepared a delicious and strengthening soup from it in her love for her father. This she poured into a bowl and covered with a white napkin, which she told Malik to take to the palace and give to her nurse, who would know what to do with it.

Meanwhile, the brothers-in-law had returned to their palaces and had given the very best cuts of meat to their cooks with instructions to make soup as fast as they could. They poured it into precious Chinese bowls and covered them with rich brocade, and carried them with great pomp to the shah. The shah was pleased that his daughters and their husbands took so much concern over his health and immediately sat down to taste their soup. First he tried the bowl sent by his first daughter, but it

was tasteless and he pushed it away and ordered a servant to take it out. Then he tasted from the bowl sent by his second daughter, but that was too highly seasoned. Screwing up his nose he ordered that it too should be taken away.

Now Peri's nurse had brought her soup along with the others, but it had been left in the outer room, for none of the servants had dared tell him about it, fearing his anger when he learned who had sent it. But when the old woman saw that the shah was no better for the soup sent by his elder daughters, she dared to tell him of the soup that Peri had made.

"Haven't I told you never to mention her to me?" stormed the shah. "How dare you mention that selfish brat's name in my presence?"

"Have mercy upon her, king of kings," the brave nurse pleaded. "She has never forgotten her father, and she never will. Your displeasure causes her the greatest pain."

"Bah! It's no more than she deserves," exclaimed the shah; but he was impressed at what he heard in spite of himself.

"You must understand, your majesty, that her *only* sorrow is not seeing you. Otherwise she is the happiest woman in the world."

Now the shah was secretly glad to hear of his daughter's happiness, and of her devotion, in spite of all he had done to her. But he wasn't going to let the nurse see this, so he humphed and said, "Well, leave her be with her radiant happiness, and don't mention her to me again."

"Certainly, your majesty. But she has made this soup with loving care, hoping it will cure you. I'm sure your all-loving heart would not wish to break hers. So please just try the soup, as you did the others."

"And where did she find deer, so difficult to come by? I suppose the royal prince, her husband, went hunting for it!" sneered the shah.

Well the nurse didn't know anything about that, but the shah was touched that his daughter did not hold his ill-will against him and ordered the soup to be brought in. He smiled at the simplicity of the bowl and its covering, and sighed to himself for it reminded him of his daughter's own simplicity of heart.

He took one sip. It was delicious! He took a second sip. Delicious, no doubt about it! He took a third sip, a fourth sip, a fifth . . . almost before he knew it the bowl was empty. He felt better already. It was truly a miracle!

Deeply moved, the shah called out that his daughter must be brought to him at once. The effect of the soup was surely proof enough of her devotion to him. There was great happiness in the palace as everybody bustled to obey the order. But where had she gone? The little cottage at the foot of the garden was empty. Neither Peri nor Malik were anywhere to be found in the city.

The shah's heart felt like lead at this news. How very ashamed of his actions he felt now. It was his fault, he had no one to blame but himself. He had treated her so harshly that he had driven her out of the city, perhaps never to return. He ordered the guards to mount their horses and search the country far and wide.

But the guards got no further than the walls of the city. For there, not more than two miles from the gates, they saw the most beautiful palace. Now how did that get there? It certainly wasn't there yesterday! It surpassed even the shah's own palace in magnificence. Over the top of its principal gate there was a large plate of refined red gold in which was inlaid, in letters made from pure diamonds, the name of this marvellous building: QASR-E-ZAR-NEGAAR, the gold-pictured palace. The walls that surrounded it were made from solid ingots of gold and silver, and the windows were made from whole rubies, emeralds and sapphires. Such was the glory and beauty of its art that it seemed too wonderful a building to be the work of human hands.

The shah's guards dashed up to stand and stare at it, and then turned tail and rushed back to their master to tell him of what they had seen. It could be no other than the palace of some powerful fairy-prince who had suddenly come to visit them! The shah immediately sent the chief officer of the guard to ask the owner to come before him.

Now you've probably guessed who was responsible for all this. Yes, Malik and Black Colt had been up to their magic

again. It was time for them to reveal themselves. So, clad in his royal robes and riding his colt, Malik rode up to the shah's palace with a following of knights and nobles, all richly dressed and armed, and riding spirited stallions as dark as Black Colt himself.

Upon his arrival Malik and all his men were ushered with great pomp and solemnity into the presence of the shah, who was sitting on a throne surrounded by all his courtiers and the two sons-in-law, all of whom were very curious to see the fairy prince. Malik strode up to the throne with becoming dignity and slightly inclined his head, although with sufficient respect to the head of a nation. The shah was amazed to see so radiantly handsome a prince and welcomed him warmly, asking him from whence he came and by what name he was known.

"Venerable Shah," he replied, "I have come from a distant but beautiful region of Persia in search of two of my slaves, whom I see standing beside you. As for my name, I am Malik Khorsheed, and the master of your sons-in-law."

With this he bowed again and stood silently watching the consternation his words had caused. The shah froze at this insult and no one dared say a word. The unfortunate sons of viziers had recognised Malik as soon as he entered and had stood rooted to the spot, trembling at what was to come.

"There must be some misunderstanding, noble Prince," said the shah, finding his voice once again. "My sons-in-law are free-born nobles."

"If your Majesty will order your respected sons-in-law to remove their shirts, you will see the truth of the matter for yourself."

The shah began to think he had only a madman and no fairy prince before him and turned grimly to the young men, ordering them to bare their backs and disprove all this nonsense. Pale and shaken, the young men slowly undid their shirts, making silent little moans to themselves and rolling their eyes. The seals of their slavery shone bright blue on their backs for all to see. There was the tense silence of shame and anger throughout the hall.

"And what are your intentions concerning these noblemen?" asked the tight-lipped shah.

"I mean to take my slaves back to my palace, if that is what you mean, Your Majesty."

"And how long were you thinking of staying in my land?"

"Only so long as it takes to persuade Your Majesty to release my property. But let us make no decisions now. I should be honored if you would accept my invitation to a banquet tomorrow night."

There seemed little else for the shah to do but accept. Malik turned on his heel and left the palace with his followers about him, leaving the shah to get over his shock as well as he could.

Malik returned to his palace and told Peri of everything that had passed. When she heard of his plans for a banquet tears of joy ran down her face at the thought of seeing her family again. Now everyone would know the worth of her husband.

Stories of the marvellous Qasr-e-zar-negaar quickly spread all over the city and people streamed down the road at all hours of the day and night to gaze with awe at the wonders of its walls, its gardens and its gates and windows. Inside they saw guards in burnished armor marching up and down, and liveried servants coming and going as they prepared for the banquet.

Next day the shah and all his court went in great state to the palace, passing through the massed crowds of onlookers, and themselves starting with astonishment at all that they saw. The gardens surpassed everything Malik had done at the shah's; the air was filled with such twinkling and fragrance that it seemed as if a host of perfumed stars inhabited by nightingales had dropped down from heaven to grace the scene. Their wonder grew as they were led into the palace by twelve gigantic negro slaves in brilliant uniforms of red silk and gold. On every wall there were miniature paintings of birds and flowers. Carved ceilings of lemon and almond woods depicted gardens, forests, and hunts, picked out with pure gold-leaf. Tall and graceful columns of crystal supported the ceilings on golden joints. Never had they witnessed such beauty in all their lives.

But the greatest beauty of all came when they were led into a throne-room of enormous dimensions, made to seem even larger

by the huge mirrors which covered entirely the walls and ceilings in frames of gold and inset precious stones. The floor was covered with the most thick-piled and colorful Persian carpets. At the far end of the room was a crystal dais with two thrones at the center, one carved from agate and the other from ivory, on the steps up to which sat twelve beautiful maidens to one side, and on the other twelve handsome youths, all dressed in blue and white silk brocades trimmed with pearls. To one side of the hall was another raised platform of silver on which were a throne and four chairs of gold for the use of the shah and his family. On another side sat a group of musicians dressed in red and gold velvet and playing the most enchanting music.

When the Shah had been led to his place, and the courtiers were seated around him, a herald dressed in a uniform of gold and green velvet entered to proclaim the arrival of the Shah-zadeh Malik Khorsheed and his princess. All eyes were eagerly turned to a mirrored door beside which two slaves in gold armor were standing to attention. Through this door Malik appeared, leading Peri by the hand. She was now dressed in fine gold and lavender silk, thickly encrusted with pearls and intricate jewelry. Over her diamond crown she wore a delicate veil of pink silk which reached down to the floor and trailed out on either side of her. A second veil of thick silver net covered her face alone.

As they entered and walked the length of the hall the small and large mirrors reflected a hundred dainty princes and princesses coming from all directions, to the great delight of the on-lookers. All were eager to see the face concealed by the veil, imagining it to be a miracle of delicate beauty merely by observing the grace of her progress at Malik's side.

Both stopped before the shah and bowed as Malik welcomed him to his house. Then Peri set one of her feet on the lower step of his throne and knelt before him, suddenly throwing back her veil and looking her father full in the face, her smiling eyes shining the more brightly for the unshed tears that danced there. To tell the truth, the shah had all but forgotten his lost daughter in his consternation at the prince's arrival. Little did he realize that this was where his daughter was hiding!



The shah very nearly cried himself as he jumped up from his throne to hug his daughter amidst the gasps of astonishment of those around him.

"I thought I had lost you forever," he said. "Can you ever forgive me the way I have treated you? "

"I was never lost, and there is nothing to forgive, my dearest father. I knew you had never forgotten me or ceased to love me in your heart of hearts."

They were interrupted by a babble of excited questioning. All were so eager to know how she came to be there, and never tired of hearing the secret of the ragged youth in a skull-cap. They would have forgotten the banquet, had not the herald come in to announce it was ready.

"Malik, my son," said the shah, when it was over, "I have only given pain and misery to you both, and you have repaid me by giving me peace and happiness. What can I possibly give you in recompense? "

"Ordinarily, Your Majesty, I should have considered I had done no more than my duty and asked for nothing in return. But I have a father who loves me as much as you love Peri, and whom I love equally. It is my great desire to take her to see him, that the two I love best in the world may know each other. Besides, it is long since I was in my own land, and I have my responsibilities there. I beg you to allow me to return there with Peri."

Put like this, it was a request the shah could not refuse, however much sorrow the thought of Peri's going away caused him, and so he promised to do everything in his power to ease their journey. Early one morning the city people witnessed their departure: the strong and graceful steed easily bore the prince and princess into the air, sailing with the unhurried majesty of a ship in the blue eastern sky. Craning their necks back they looked and wondered until the voyagers dwindled into specks and disappeared beyond the horizon.

## PART FOUR

In the capital of Eastern Persia Malik's father was still mourning for his lost son. It was so many years since he and Black Colt had soared up into the sky; and when they had failed to return a great unhappiness had descended upon the palace and the people.

It was not long after Malik had left that the shah learned of his queen's wickedness. He could not help noticing that, in spite of what she had said, she seemed quite well as soon as Malik was gone. In fact she was the only one in the palace who seemed at all happy. And when the shah finally happened to learn from one of her own servants of the monstrous lies she had told, and of her plans to murder his son, he was so very angry that he gave orders for the queen to be put to death. It was not the custom to execute queens in that country, however, so instead she was told to choose between a sharp sword with which to kill herself and being tied backwards on a wild horse and driven out into the wilderness, to live or die as fate decreed.

"Let the sword be stabbed into the heart of my enemies," declaimed the fierce woman. "I will choose the horse to ride into the world wherever I wish."

Then the shah ordered her to be deprived of all her honors and stripped of her jewels and royal clothes. She was put on the wildest horse in the stable and driven over the border never to return to the kingdom upon pain of death. And that was the last that anyone heard of her.

The years passed wearily for the sad and lonely shah. But one shining morning a servant rushed into his presence to report the strange sight in the sky: a winged horse flying before the sun! Forgetting his kingly dignity, the shah raced into the garden, with his right foot in his left slipper and the other one bare, to mix with the many courtiers who had also come to witness this amazing apparition.

As the horse and its riders plunged towards where he was standing the shah began to pray desperately. "Oh let it be my son coming back! Let it be real! I have been tormented long enough! "

The people began to shout joyfully when they recognized their beloved Malik returned from the heart of the sky into which he had disappeared so long ago. And who was that sitting in front of him like a fairy dressed in white silk? Black Colt came down like a huge swan upon the very spot from which he had once leaped into the air. It was neither a miracle nor a vision. There was the prince, stronger and more handsome than when he departed, come back with a bride on his faithful steed!

The shah stood weeping openly, his arms outstretched to welcome his son. Leaping to the ground with Peri in his arms, Malik threw himself on his knees before his father and kissed his feet amidst the people's cheers. The shah clasped both son and bride in his arms and ushered them into the palace, greatly wondering what he had been doing since he had left, and how he had come to win such a beautiful wife.

The good news spread through the land and the shah ordered that the people be feasted at his cost for forty days, and that during this time they were to be freed from paying taxes. There was dancing in the houses, in the bazaars, and in all the streets. But nothing could equal the splendor of the night-long receptions at the palace in honor of the prince and Peri.

But on the last of these happy nights a servant came with bad news for Malik. Black Colt had disappeared from the stable, the same stable in which he had always lived at the palace, and the imprint of his hooves was nowhere to be seen on the paths leading from it. The color left his face and he burst into tears as he came to the empty stall.

"Why has he left me? What have I ever done to hurt him?" sobbed the heart-broken prince.

There was no consoling Malik. His oldest friend had left him without even telling him. Lingered miserably in the stable he stared into the empty stall and dreamed of the past. There was his colt's silken mat where it had fallen on the ground, and there . . . THERE! . . . there was a thick bunch of shining silky hairs from his tail. It was a memento from Black Colt to Malik. And as he picked them up gently he heard, as if in a dream, the words of so long ago when he was a stranger in an unknown

land: "It would be best if we separated . . . But I am not deserting you . . . Just burn one of the hairs and I will come to you immediately".

No, the colt would never be disloyal to him. Now they had both grown up and had their own lives to live, Even a stall of gold was not the same as freedom to wander at will. But each had helped the other in the past; they were friends forever, no matter how far apart.

So Malik went back to the palace comforted. And for many years afterwards he and Peri lived in happiness and prosperity, governing the land wisely and with justice, beloved by their people.